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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the impact of declining rural community infrastructure on social, environmental, and economic well-being in Western Australia's central wheatbelt. Questionnaires were completed by 398 residents of the central wheatbelt, on-farm interviews were conducted with 68 respondents, and 4 focus groups were held in area towns. Respondents reported that while farm income increased during the previous 10 years, disposable income decreased. Few respondents were confident that their children would live close by in adulthood due to lack of work opportunities. General health services were a concern, but participants were prepared to live with the current service provided it was not further reduced. However, mental health was a recurring issue, with many indicating that mental health issues encompassed unresolved family issues and sustained stress and were having a direct impact on the economic viability of some enterprises. Lack of telecommunications service and loss of banking and postal services contributed to a business drain from small communities. The reduction of social services especially affected women, who were leaving because of isolation and limited support. Declining enrollment threatened the survival of some schools. In addition, many parents reported that they would move or send their children away if good education was not locally available, thus further impacting enrollment. The rural voting population is not large enough to persuade politicians to subsidize rural infrastructure, so the rationalization trend will likely continue. Withdrawal of infrastructure and services based exclusively on economic reasons does not consider human or environmental implications. A national holistic plan that acknowledges human needs and social equity should be implemented. (Contains 62 references and the survey questionnaire.) (TD)

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RURAL INDUSTRIES RESEARCH
& DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Impact of Declining Rural Infrastructure

A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

by Fiona Haslem McKenzie
Edith Cowan University

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Foreword

This research project aims to increase the awareness of the relationship between the social needs of rural communities and their economic viability. Specifically, it focuses on the productive broadacre agricultural region covering the ABS statistical divisions of Hotham, Campion and Lakes in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia. This region has few towns and has experienced persistent depopulation since the 1960's. There is limited industry diversity, which means that the local economies are heavily influenced by the health of the agricultural sector.

The project has investigated the effect of declining rural community infrastructure and whether there is a relationship between social and community issues in a region and its economic and environmental sustainability. As some rural towns increase in size, others are withering. Services are either withdrawn or centralised to the larger centres forcing rural residents to change the way they do business and where they socialise. Questions are raised about whether these changes affect the efficiency of farm enterprises and whether small communities are worth saving for more than sentimental reasons.

The project was conducted over 16 months using questionnaires, face to face interviews with farmers in the region and focus groups in several regional towns. It revealed a broad range of issues which are challenging farmers but several in particular were identified as causing serious disruption to families, businesses and consequently the region and industry. A number of recommendations are considered but the key to addressing change is dependent upon an holistic view of the agricultural industry and the people involved in it, in order that solutions be developed that acknowledge human and environmental needs while at the same time achieving optimum economic returns.

This publication, one of RIRDC's diverse range of over 400 research titles, forms part of our Human Capital, Communications and Information Systems R&D program which aims to enhance human capital and facilitate innovation in rural industries and communities.

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Peter Core
Managing Director
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This research project could not have been completed without the co-operation and considerable time given by all of the participants from the twenty five shires in the ABS statistical divisions of Hotham, Lakes and Campion in the central Wheatbelt of Western Australia. In order to protect the identities of the people involved in this study, names and specific locations have been changed, however the essential details have not. To all of those people, thank you for your confidence and time. I sincerely hope this report will make a difference.

I am particularly appreciative of the time, guidance, and expertise in a variety of areas given by the project's principal research assistant, Kate Loughton. Kate and Professor Alan Black assisted in the original research proposal and Kate provided valuable feedback on draft material. Many other people have participated in this project and their valuable contributions are acknowledged here with thanks. Sally Kenny transcribed the 68 on-farm interviews, Christine Fryer entered the quantitative data, Daniel Le Roux helped with other typing and Ching Segui translated statistics into meaningful graphs and with Kate, patiently assisted with the statistical analysis. Clive Reynoldson from the Faculty of Business and Public Management at Edith Cowan University provided economic insights to many of the issues and read the final drafts. Particular thanks goes to the *Women in Leadership Project* management team at Edith Cowan University, whose support and faith in me has given this project vigour, in particular Linley Lord whose feedback on the draft material, and thoughtful guidance was particularly appreciated. The encouragement and example shown by Dr Catherine Smith was also very important.

I am indebted to David McKenzie for his constant encouragement and patience while this research project was in progress.

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Executive Summary

Farming and primary industry production have been key industries in the white history of Australia and it can be argued, were pivotal in shaping Australian nationhood. Until the mid-1950s, agriculture contributed 85 to 90 percent of the country's export earnings (Alston, 1995) which has now declined to about 30 per cent. The economic importance is not the only contribution of the farming sector. Rural Australia and 'the bush' have also been central to the invention of the national identity. The image of 'the bush' had a certain romance that the suburban reality did not engender, so although Australia has always been highly urbanised, the rural idol has been a persistent influence for all Australians. It is therefore alarming to document the considerable depopulation trend, the tenuous economic situation of many farmers and the stultification of some communities in the Western Australian Central Wheatbelt statistical divisions of Hotham, Campion and Lakes. It is however important not to fall into the trap identified by Sher and Sher (1993) of picturing "the countryside and its inhabitants in nostalgic terms, (and as a consequence), failing to see them as vital communities, as key contributors to the national economy, and as people and places with a significant role to play in creating Australia's future" (p.6).

This research project has investigated whether declining rural community infrastructure has had an impact on the social, environmental and economic well-being in this region. It is an important question given that this region has limited economic diversity and still contributes a significant proportion of the State's broadacre agricultural produce.

A comprehensive questionnaire was sent late in 1997 to randomly selected recipients from throughout the ABS statistical divisions of Hotham, Lakes and Campion . Three hundred and ninety eight responses were received. Early in 1998, on-farm interviews were conducted with 68 repondents and four focus groups were held in towns in each of the divisions.

The research project differentiated between farm income and disposable income. It was expected that farm income had increased in the last decade for many farmers but disposable income has in fact decreased for many, as technology, farm inputs and the cost of economies of scale have exceeded returns. Farmers throughout the Central Wheatbelt have tried a number of strategies in the last ten years to maintain or increase both their farm and disposable incomes. The questionnaire showed that 46% of all respondents, in all three statistical divisions had increased their overdraft, 44% had increased their acreage, 63% had increased their cropping program, 73% had increased their use of fertiliser and 27% increased their stock numbers. Interestingly, 23% admitted to foregoing a conservation program while 13% said they had foregone professional advice. Almost a quarter of the respondents claimed they had increased bartering goods and services with neighbours. It was also indicated by 31% of respondnts that off-farm income had been sought in the last ten years to increase disposable income.

The questionnaire also addressed farmer's view of their tenure in the profession of farming and the community in which they lived. Overall, 41% of all respondents claimed they had considered another profession. The viability of the enterprise and government policies were the most often cited reasons for considering leaving the sector, although an alarming 17% admitted they had seriously considered leaving the profession because of farm succession disputes.

Farm succession issues have caused a great deal of angst and wasted valuable resources. This report shows that farm succession issues have the potential to undermine community and enterprise sustainability. Farmers have tended not to include a comprehensive farm succession plan as an integral part of business planing causing serious emotional and financial drain from which some enterprises never fully recover. The outcomes of this scenario have a ripple effect into the community, causing children and services to be compromised in some circumstances.

Most respondent's and interviewees would prefer that their children live close by them in adulthood but few were confident that would eventuate for a number of reasons. The presumption of many was that their son or sons would be farmers but many felt their enterprise would not be viable with more incomes being drawn from it. Few participants were hopeful that their daughters would return to the community due to lack of work opportunities.

A significant proportion of the research project was devoted to the impact of the centralisation or withdrawal of services on farm enterprises and communities. Accessibility of essential services within an hour is the accepted government standard, however many respondents made particular mention that an hour's drive is in fact at least two hours unproductive time away from the enterprise. Furthermore, many respondents commented that the unreliability of the services was not acceptable nor the lack of choice of service providers. Of particular concern for this project was whether the change in the delivery of certain services had demanded more disposable income, and if so, how farmers were meeting the need.

The provision of government infrastructure and services generally in the Central Wheatbelt is complicated. The de-population trend in this region has made it uneconomic to continue a presence in the region and so many services have been withdrawn or centralised. A number of towns in the central wheatbelt have even offered free land to entice newcomers and thereby boost shire numbers to keep services. Few of these strategies have worked in the long term.

General health services are a concern but it would seem that the participants in this study are prepared to live with the current service provided it is not pared any more. Mental health however was a recurring issue in the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. A few were prepared to speak of their own experiences but most were concerned about how the various expressions of mental illness were impacting upon their families and communities. Suicide in particular was viewed as a real threat because it affected how people viewed themselves, their community and even their industry. Many participants indicated that mental health issues encompassed unresolved family issues and sustained stress and was having a direct impact on the economic viability of some enterprises. Most felt help was necessary but few could suggest how that might be delivered or addressed.

An equitable and cost-effective mobile telecommunications service was identified as necessary for the continued efficiency of the sector. A more up-to-date service could also offer some solutions for those communities which have lost traditional banking services. A co-ordinated approach between banks, postal services, local authorities and businesses would go a long way towards securing a satisfactory service and stem the business drain away from small communities. There is a general sense of inequity when compared to urban dwellers, who are invariably the policymakers rationalising the services. This sense of inferiority feeds negativity and the cycle continues.

Education is the outstanding infrastructure issue that actually mobilises families. Parents in the Central Wheatbelt are, in general, determined that their children will be given a broad educational experience. If they deem that not to be available nearby, there is a high likelihood that they will move themselves or send their children away so that a suitable education can be accessed. Such decisions have a significant impact upon the enterprise and the community. It would seem then, that the availability of infrastructure or the lack of it, can influence business decisions and the viability of communities in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia.

Furthermore, it is increasingly being acknowledged that that the contribution to the agricultural sector by women has not been sufficiently recognised. The data and information collected from this study indicates that women bear the brunt when social services in rural communities are reduced. Isolation and limited support for women are consistent reasons for them wanting to leave a rural situation. It has been admitted by all participants that rural regions and the agricultural industries can ill afford a drain of women. Similarly, the youth drain is a real concern for the continuing viability of whatever community services are there now, in the future. Regions, which are losing population or employment because of a perceived lack of good business opportunities, lose capital and potential entrepreneurs and therefore vibrancy and optimism.

Housing and casual labour in many communities were also identified as problems. Lack of adequate housing hinders opportunities to attract newcomers and potential casual labour and can prevent the next generation from having some independence while staying in their community. As a consequence, many workers and the next generation travel long distances to work or socialise with the associated costs in wear and tear on vehicles and wasted time. These two issues seem to compound the already identifed issues of de-population and community withdrawal.

Rural citizens are mindful of the need to support and participate in, their local communities, knowing that if their local town is diminished, access to whatever services are available will go, thereby exacerbating the problems of distance and the sense of isolation. The pressure associated with combining community responsibilities, farm work and domestic duties has caused stress in a significant proportion of participants.

There is no evidence to indicate that international markets for primary produce will return to the halcyon days prior to the 1970s. There is consensus among the main political parties and the key private sector leaders in favour of the 'new status quo', and a number of farmers who are making a good livelihood from broadacre

production were interviewed for this project. There are also many farmers in the three statistical divisions who are struggling and despite trying a number of strategies to create wealth, are in fact getting poorer. It is likely that rationalisation of the sector will continue, particularly while there is no opportunity for economic diversity. While the government is loathe to increase taxes, and therefore subsidise rural infrastructure, it is unlikely that the trend of rationalisation will change. There is not enough public money to sustain rural services, nor is there the voting population to persuade politicians otherwise. It is inevitable then, that some communities will wither, unless industry diversification is encouraged by both the government and local rural residents.

While rationalisation is likely to continue, it is important that services and infrastructure are not withdrawn based exclusively on the rationale of economic formulae or in response to economic stimuli. An holistic view is recommended that allows potential solutions to be developed on an integrated basis. This means that a national rather than simply a regional or local plan be put in place that acknowledges human needs and social equity. The long term outcomes of economic rationalist decisions do not consider the human or environmental implications that this project contends will ultimately have poor economic consequences for a broad range of people and industries living in urban and rural regions.

1. Setting the Scene

1.1 Background

Since the beginning of the age of Classical political economy in the late eighteen and early nineteen centuries in Britain, writers such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo have ascribed a fundamental importance to the contribution of agriculture to the gross output of the economy and to capital formation. Smith for example, discussed the interrelatedness of the manufacturing and agricultural sectors of an economy (Lloyd & Malcolm, 1997). This research therefore is not breaking new ground. Nonetheless, the relationship between the primary, secondary and the increasingly important tertiary sector in the last three decades has been profound. In that time, Australia has integrated its production, realisation of profit and the circulation of financial capital into a rapidly increasing global world market.

The collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971, and the oil price shocks of the mid and late 1970s triggered recession, inflation and rising unemployment in Australia (Marsden, Murdoch, Lowe, Munton, & Flynn, 1993; Tonts and Jones, 1996). Fundamental political and economic restructuring in both the private and public sectors appeared as a response to this international economic crisis (Lipietz, 1992). The decision was made by successive Australian governments to orient the domestic economy to global markets. Reform, deregulation and liberalised financial policies facilitated Australia's greater engagement with the global economy and from this time adoption of sophisticated technologies and the growth of the services sector accelerated. Globalisation of the Australian economy has reinforced the effect of market changes causing continual development in technologies, products, markets and modes of distribution. James suggests that it is now "almost impossible for social life to sustain itself without reference to the global, both culturally and economically; ... relations grounded in face to face association ... are increasingly being overlaid and dominated by more abstract and globalised processes" (James, 1993, p.33). As a consequence, individual tastes and market trends have changed, moving away from mass production and mass consumption towards a system based upon consumer demand for differentiated products requiring more flexible modes of production (Stoker, 1990). Furthermore, products such as wool no longer have broad appeal and demand for other products have overtaken it.

Increasingly, the public sector has been characterised by the privatisation of government services, short term policy goals rather than long term strategies, reduced cross subsidisation of services in rural area, and an increasing focus on rural communities meeting their own needs (Rolley & Humphreys, 1993). The responsibility for community well-being has been increasingly devolved to local authorities and organisations (Tonts & Jones, 1997). All of these changes have had significant effects upon the Australian economy and have led to major shifts in the way the business of farming is conducted. The business of farming is in a state of almost continuous change in response to globalisation and increasingly competitive overseas markets, falling commodity prices, an oversupply of agricultural products, the development of large-scale agri-business firms, changing environmental conditions and increased technological intervention into agricultural production.

The emerging literature on globalisation and agriculture has tended to focus on the processes of economic change, particularly the integration of the Australian economy into the global economy, labour force adjustment and the development of economies of scale within the agricultural sector (Taylor:1992; Lawrence:1990). Even though the family farm has, and continues to be, the backbone of Australian agriculture, little has been documented of the social and environmental implications and inter-relationships of these changes. This report considers the omniscient globalisation trends and how the changes in agricultural markets and their impact on the social and environmental spheres as well as the economic adjustments, might influence productivity on farms particularly in Western Australia, which produces a considerable proportion of the nation's commercial agricultural crops. As most of the Australian research has concentrated on the experience of the eastern states agricultural industry, (Lawrence:1987; Gray:1994, Sorensen & Epps:1996; Liepins:1995, Taylor:1992; Alston:1995) this research contributes to the overall picture of the Australian agricultural sector and regional issues.

Western Australia, with a much smaller population, contributes a significant proportion of the overall Australian export of agricultural products. In 1996 Western Australia contributed 24.5% of Australian agricultural foreign exports, producing 40.6% of Australia's wheat and 25.3% of its wool. (ABS cat. 1306.5) Unlike the Eastern States however, Western Australia has few regional centres with a small rural population scattered over a large geographic area. In the wheatbelt in 1996, there were only eight rural urban centres with more than 2,500 people. Only one of those eight had more than 7,000 people (Geraldton).

The sheep and wheat belt has limited industry diversity which means that the regional economies are heavily influenced by the health of the agricultural sector. The three Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) divisions, Hotham, Lakes and Campion studied in this project are contiguous in the central wheat and sheep belt of Western Australia, as shown in Map 1. These three statistical divisions are limited to agricultural production and can be defined as completely rural. It can be argued that this area is one half of the central wheatbelt but for the purposes of this project it will be referred to as the Central Wheatbelt. Farm enterprises in these three divisions, most of which are family farms, are recognised as generating a significant proportion of the state of Western Australia's wheat quota as well as producing high quality fine merino wool and a variety of other grains including barley, oats, lupins and pulse grains.

Figure 1, Map 1

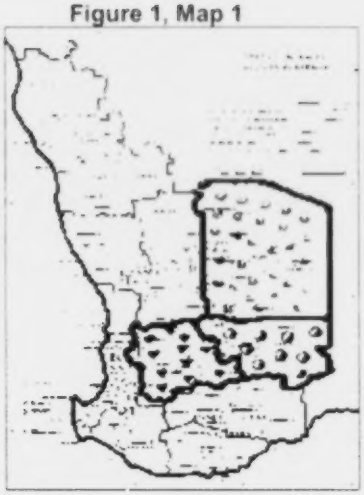


Table 1:1 shows the wheat and wool production of the region as a percentage of the state's total production.

Table 1:1 Value of Wheat and Wool Production for 1995/96

	Value Wheat For Grain		Value Shorn & On-Skin Wool	
	($'000)	%	($'000)	%
Campion	411,969.4	22.74%	39,435.7	6.40%
Hotham	120,792.5	6.67%	98,604.6	15.99%
Lakes	262,117.6	14.47%	41,421.9	6.72%
TOTAL	794,879.5	43.87%	179,462.2	29.10%
Western Australia	1,811,958.6	100.00%	616,621.7	100.00%

Australian agricultural producers, usually family farmers, have been required to quickly expand and develop skills in a wide range of areas. Broadacre farms in the central wheatbelt vary in size but average 2500 hectares (AgStats:1997), and if the trends continue, the average farm size is likely to increase every year. The pressure to achieve economies of scale and efficiencies has caused farms to become bigger, producing more with less labour and those who could not change have withdrawn from not only their industry, but often also their rural communities. Communities are becoming progressively smaller. Governments are rationalising infrastructure provision and cannot justify to the voting majority, (usually urban based), large scale expenditure to small communities even though some of those communities maybe generating a significant proportion of the nation's export wealth. Their overall share of the total national income is small. The crisis has progressively reduced net farm incomes and cash operating surpluses (Fisher, 1991) (Lloyd & Malcolm, 1997).

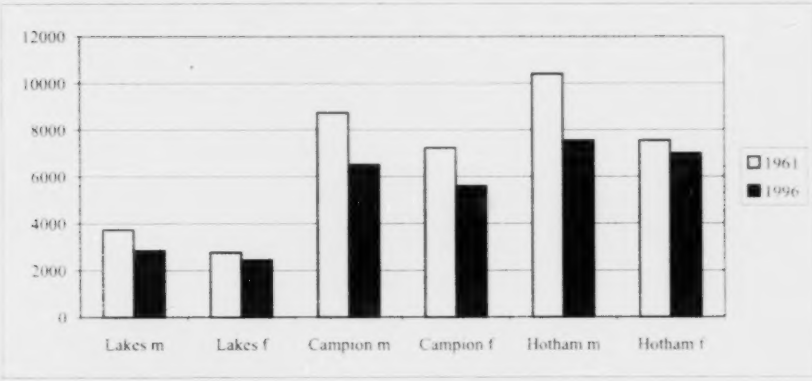
There is evidence (Haslam McKenzie, 1998) that in Western Australia the number of family farming enterprises has approximately halved in the last 35 years as a cost price squeeze has forced many from the sector and rural regions. ABS census data 1961-1996 shows that the

three identified areas of Campion, Lakes and Hotham are the most severely depopulated regions in the sheep/wheat belt of WA. Furthermore, the depopulation trend is not occurring evenly between the genders. The number of women in the three agricultural divisions has decreased although, as shown in graph 1:1 the number of women in the three agricultural subdivisions has decreased at a slower rate than that of men. Graph 1:1 illustrates table 1:2 and shows that the number of women is still less than that of men but more men have left the area than women.

Table1:2 Male And Female Population Changes In Three Statistical Divisions 1961-91.

	Lakes		Campion		Hotham	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
1961	2769	3736	7224	8731	8695	10391
1996	2448	2841	5614	6516	6995	7545
% Diff	-11.59%	-23.95%	-22.28%	-25.36%	-19.55%	-27.38%

Graph 1:1 The Rate of Population Change, Male Versus Female, in Agricultural Statistical Divisions, 1961-96.



This depopulation trend has occurred against a backdrop of a declining farm labour force generally throughout Australia, and of men particularly, on the farm. It is difficult to accurately ascertain the changes in female participation rates in the agricultural sector because, in the past, census statistics have not always been gathered in a way to properly account for farm women and their work. Nonetheless, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and anecdotal evidence suggest that the increase in the number of women working on farms has escalated in the last fifteen years. ABARE data from the AAGIS survey of broadacre and dairy farms found that in 1993-4 approximately 40% of all business partners were women. This was supported in a survey of agricultural women undertaken throughout Western Australian in June 1997 (Haslam McKenzie). Furthermore, changes in the tax laws have increased the number of women who are now business partners in farms.

There is evidence to suggest (Tonts & Jones, 1996; Jones & Tonts, 1995) that the social fabric of the agricultural industry has the potential to influence the long term health and viability of the sheep and wheat industries in WA. It has been argued that as the economic

viability of the family farm and agricultural sector of Western Australia is being threatened and therefore an important source of foreign earnings, so too is the social fabric.

The purpose of this study is to test that assertion. It aims to

- identify the difficult choices farmers face in dealing with the trends and developments;
- ascertain the social costs of these changes and whether they have a relationship with agricultural productivity;
- determine whether the decisions being made by farmers in response to the pressures are likely to have a long term detrimental effect upon the environment and the quality of agricultural production;
- identify those services which are deemed crucial to each of the communities studied before those communities show significant signs of decay.

1.2 Method

It was decided that in order to gain a thorough understanding of social and economic issues in the central wheatbelt of Western Australia, a comprehensive survey of the three key areas should be undertaken involving a questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.

A pilot questionnaire was devised and sent to 312 randomly selected addressees. The contact name and addresses were taken from 1996 shire electoral roles. Seventeen surveys were sent to dead addresses. One hundred and twenty five completed questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 42 per cent. The pilot responses were analysed and after consultation the questionnaire was slightly modified to clarify a number of issues.

After consultation with RIRDC, it was decided to distribute the questionnaire via local newspapers in the Central Wheatbelt. This had proved very successful in a previous research project. Lamentably, a similar success rate was not achieved so 2000 questionnaires were mailed out in early October 1997 to addresses which were randomly selected from the 1996 local government electoral roles. Follow-up reminders were not possible as it was almost harvest time, when farmers are completely focussed on that important task. The response rate was 20 per cent.

The questionnaire was the same for all respondents and covered a number of information areas. (See Appendix 1). It began by introducing the project, its purpose and author. It then required that the postcode be entered in order to identify the respondent's ABS division. Most questions were multiple choice with some opportunities for added comments or insights. The information requested included:

- the demographics of the respondent and their family,
- the intention of the respondent and his/her family to stay in the enterprise and/or the district,
- the types of paid work,
- the extent of the respondent's involvement in their enterprise as compared with that of a partner or other family members,
- the viability of the enterprise

- stress levels of the respondent in relation to farm finances,
- access to communication and computer facilities,
- the availability of services and/or the need for particular services in that district,
- a comparison of farm income and disposable income over the last ten years,
- whether the availability or the lack of services impacts upon disposable income,
- what strategies, if any, have been initiated in the last ten years to increase disposable income,
- participation of respondent in social and community activities,
- the frequency of vacations,
- motivators or disincentives to continue participation in the enterprise, community and/or district.

The returned survey forms were collated and the data was entered into Excel 97 and later translated in to SPSS 7.5 for analysis. A range of descriptive statistics were calculated using Excel 7 pivot tables. Crosstabs and Chi Square were calculated using SPSS 7.5.

The questionnaire respondents could choose to remain anonymous, but they were given an opportunity to identify themselves if they were happy to be interviewed in 1998. An undertaking was made that the identity of the respondents remain confidential. For that reason, the people and their specific locations have been changed in the report, but the essential details remain the same. Almost half of the respondents indicated they were willing to be interviewed if the timing was convenient, despite warnings from a number of quarters that farmers were private people who traditionally did not disclose personal and business information.

Face to face on-farm, one hour interviews with 68 respondents from throughout the Central Wheatbelt were conducted during the first quarter of 1998. When contacted, only seven respondents could not be interviewed when requested, because the dates clashed with other commitments. There were also several focus groups, one of which was organised by a shire, keen to generate discussion and the acknowledgement of key issues for local farmers.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-formal structure and recorded. The questions were semi-structured, following the framework of the questionnaire. In most situations, the interviewees were keen to discuss both personal and business issues. Sensitive issues such as farm succession, disposable income, marital issues and mental health were discussed willingly by most interviewees and very often it was difficult to complete the interview within the agreed time. In some situations, the session began with one respondent but a partner would later be invited to join the interview to give their perspective on issues and/or their expertise. (For example, many men responded to the questionnaire but when interviewed could not answer many of the enterprise business questions because that was the domain of their partner).

In mid 1998, four focus groups were convened, one in Lakes and Campion and two in Hotham. These were conducted using Electronic Meeting System, a networked set of laptop computers using specialised Meeting Works ™ for Windows software that provides support for face-to-face meetings. The system allows teams and groups to capitalise on both the strengths of their individual members and group synergy. During the meeting, the

facilitator presents the agenda, paces the group through topics and tasks, leads the discussion, poses questions, and interprets results. (See Appendix 2 for the agenda).

It is known that on at least four occasions the questionnaire was photocopied and responded to separately by different members of the enterprise. In all four cases, the responses to some questions were quite different, particularly in relation to stress, the impact of services upon disposable income and the respondent's sense of tenure to the district and/or the enterprise. At two interview locations, several respondents asked to be interviewed separately.

All the interviews were transcribed using MS Word 97and imported into NUD*IST for coding and analysis. The data collected from the questionnaire was used to provide a framework for the interview questions. Issues such as mental health that were not addressed in the questionnaire had to be included in the interview questions due to the amount of unsolicited comments on this subject.

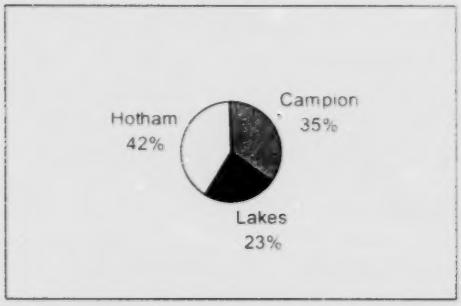
The primary aim of analysis was to establish the nature of the relationship between economic policy, social and environmental variables in farming communities. The type of data collected was nominal and ordinal therefore making the use of Chi Square essential. The focus groups and interviews addressed these relationships as it was considered to be of such a delicate and complex nature that only the richness of qualitative data could provide an insight as to how the farming community view these issues.

2. Demographic Profiles

2.1 Who Participated?

A questionnaire was posted in early October 1997 to 2 000 non-gender specific recipients whose contact addresses were randomly selected from the 1996 local government electoral roles. As mentioned previously, no follow-up reminders were sent. There was a 20 per cent return rate, which equated to 398 responses. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity and were only identified by their postcode which were then sorted into ABS statistical divisions. Graph 2.1 shows the breakup of the respondents by statistical division.

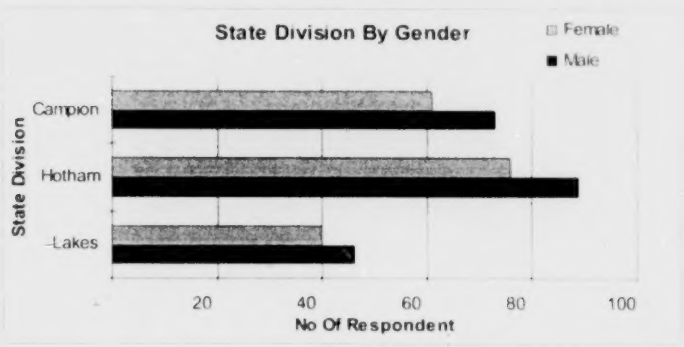
Graph 2.1 Survey Respondents by Statistical Division



Respondents were given the opportunity to provide their contact details if they wished to participate in on-farm interviews or focus groups in 1998. Almost a third of the respondents supplied contact details. Sixty-seven confidential on-farm interviews were conducted and four focus groups were convened with an average of seven participants in each group.

Overall, 68 per cent of the survey respondents were male, however the focus group participants were equally divided and 62 per cent of on-farm interviewees were women. The gender breakdown of the respondents in each statistical division is shown in Graph 2.2. (2 per cent of the survey returns did not indicate their gender).

Graph 2.2 Survey Respondent's Gender by Statistical Division



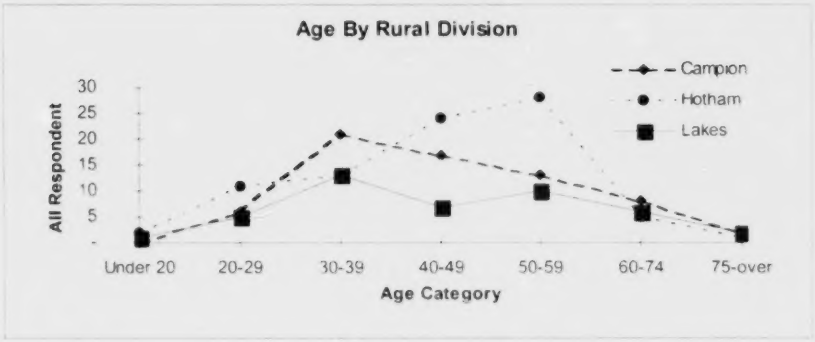
2.2 Age of Respondents

The age of all respondents is shown in table 2.1. Graph 2.3 indicates the age distribution over the three statistical divisions.

Table 2.1 Age of all Respondents

Age	Percent of Total Respondents
< 20	1%
20-29	10%
30-39	28%
40-49	24%
50-59	23%
60-74	11%
> 75	3%

Graph 2.3 Age Distribution by Statistical Division

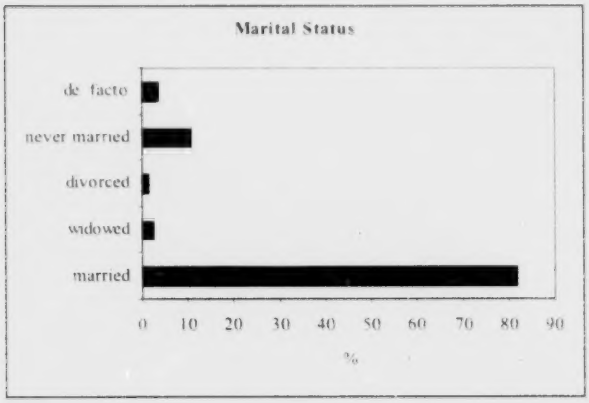


The distribution shows respondents in Hotham were older and that the respondents in Lakes were generally younger.

2.3 Marital Status of Respondents

The marital status of respondents was similar across all three statistical divisions as shown in Graph 2.4 with the vast majority of respondents either married or in a de facto relationship.

Graph 2.4 Marital Status



There was much discussion both in the focus groups and during the on-farm interviews with regard to the role of marital partners and where, in diminishing farm communities, a farmer might find a life partner. (The latter is discussed elsewhere in the report). The 'K' family from Lakes discussed the roles of partners on farms.

I/viewer Do you think having a married relationship on a farm is a good thing?

Mrs'K' I think it would be very hard for a single guy to run a farm. He'd have to do everything himself. I do all the bookwork and I am able to help at seeding time

drive a tractor for a few hours so husband's dad can go and do his odd jobs. That sort of thing, helping shift machinery and getting the sheep in when you are shearing, if you are by yourself it would all just be too hard.

Mr 'K' The wife is called on to do a lot of work outside the house at certain times of the year which is a huge benefit from my point of view. It can vary from all sorts of jobs, from driving the tractor to getting the sheep, to going in to town for parts. Without the wife it would be a lot harder. I am totally exhausted by the time I come in at night and to sit down and have to do the books then, I couldn't face it. I suppose I would just have to take a day off a month to do it and at this stage I don't do that. (Wife) does all the books and that works out well. If there are any queries she talks to me at night about it and we sort it out. To do the whole lot myself, I couldn't do it.

Overall, 12 per cent of the respondents indicated they had never married, 42 were male while only four were female. More than half of those who had never married were older than 30 years of age.

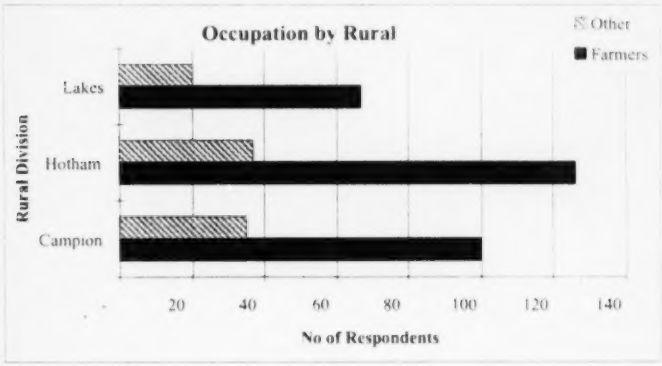
Table 2.2 Gender Breakdown by Statistical Division of those who have Never Married

	Never Married	
Statistical Division	Male	Female
Campion	11	1
Hotham	18	1
Lakes	13	2

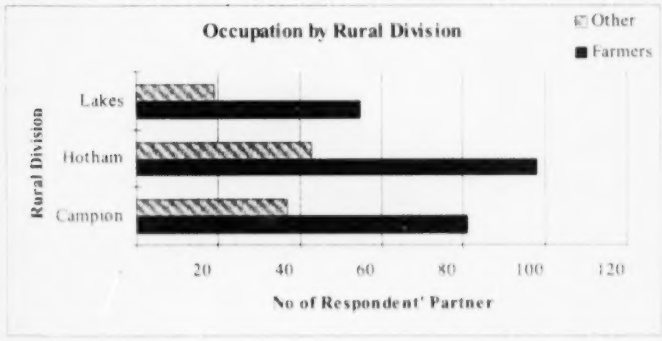
2.4 Occupation of Respondents

Most participants nominated themselves as 'farmers' or 'married to a farmer'. Only four of the interviewees did not derive any income from a farm although two of the four were involved in an agricultural business of some kind. The survey responses to the question on occupation show that many respondents spend time both on and off farm pursuing an income. Graphs 2.5.1 and 2.5.2 convey the responses to questions 7 and 8, (respondent's occupation and the occupation of their partner). These graphs however do not indicate whether the respondent and their partner had both on and off farm income.

Graph 2.5.1 Respondent's Occupation by Rural Division



Graph 2.5.2 Respondent's Partner's Occupation by Rural Division



These statistics reflect the difficulties statisticians and researchers generally, have of properly documenting the roles and contributions of farmers and farm partners. The contribution of women in particular, to agriculture is hidden in economic statistics. The *Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of Women in Agriculture* Report (Elix & Lambert, 1998) documented the role which women play in the Australian agricultural sectors and the skills and experiences they bring to this role. In a separate volume it also estimated the current and potential contribution of women in economic terms. Past studies (Lyson, 1990; Ghorayshi, 1989; Alston, 1995a; Sheridan, 1994), show that this contribution increases in times of economic downturn when farmers adjust by lessening their inputs into the farm (including paid labour), by using more unwaged family labour and by seeking off-farm income. At such times, women often undertake more on- and off-farm work, and as noted by Ghorayshi (1989, p.581) "working for the farm may require working off the farm". Lyson (1990) noted that few women identify themselves as farmers when asked to list their occupation on any official documents. Lyson lists three reasons for this:

- Many farm women hold off-farm jobs which serve as the locus of their occupational identification (even though they are active farm participants as well).
- Although most farm women are active participants in the family enterprise, they may not identify themselves as the 'primary' producer.

- Farming has traditionally been classified as a 'male' occupation and women are loathe to classify themselves as such.

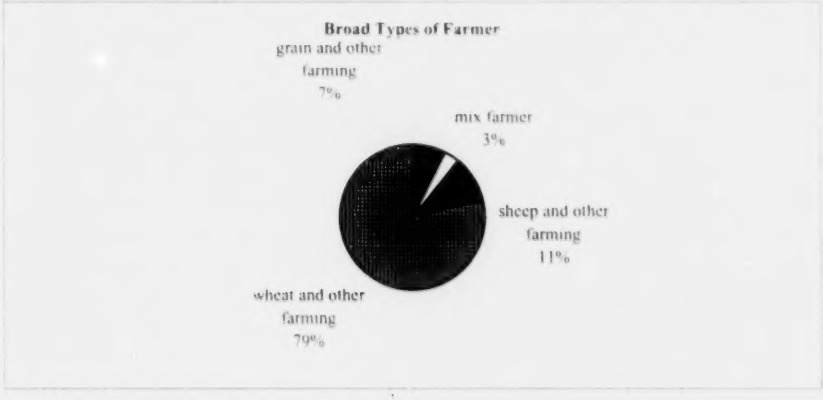
The on-farm interviews and focus groups facilitated discussion around these issues and many agreed with the conclusions drawn by Lyson. Nonetheless there were participants who claimed the female partner had nothing to do with the farm business. This was usually when there were intra and inter-generational farming arrangements.

The respondents also showed that very few were looking for paid work. Only 5 per cent of the respondents were looking for part-time or full-time work, the majority being female. Some of the on-farm interviews and focus groups indicated that for an adult member of some farm enterprises to have an off-farm job costs the enterprise more in travel expenses and lost labour contribution than a paid job is able to compensate. Many of the interviewees also noted that at different times of the year, it is very difficult to find the required casual labour. For those with non-farm specialist skills in some areas, it is often difficult to use those skills and to find appropriate employment, although a female architect in a small town had successfully established her own business and another sells her graphic art remotely.

2.5 The Types of Farmers who Responded

The types of farmer surveyed were grouped into broad categories and these are depicted in graph 2.6

Graph 2.6 Broad Types of Farmers



It is interesting to note that before the farmers were grouped and farmers listed their specific type of farming, there were no respondents from Lakes or Campion who were sheep farmers only. Similarly, there were no farmers from Hotham who were wheat farmers only. This reflects the regions' suitability for different types of farming. Hotham is more suited to sheep and mixed farming while Campion and Lakes are better suited to wheat/grain and mixed farming.

2.6 Respondents' Formal Qualifications

While it is acknowledged that there are many successful farmers of both gender who have basic qualifications, it is important to identify the formal skills there are available in the agricultural sector and where they are located. Farmers are cognisant however, that increasingly, greater sophistication in farm management, development of good business management and communication skills and a better understanding of marketing issues is required to take advantage of emerging opportunities and to remain viable. There is also the pressure to keep ahead with rapid and expensive technological change. A broader education could enhance farmer's business acumen. This has been strongly supported by research undertaken by Kilpatrick (1996) in Tasmania. Kilpatrick stated that Australia's farm workforce is poorly educated compared to other sectors of the economy and with overseas competitors. Thirty one per cent of the agricultural workforce have tertiary qualifications compared with 52 per cent of the Australian workforce generally, although Kilpatrick's research found that rural women hold tertiary qualifications in similar proportions to the population average. Graph 2.7 shows the distribution of formal qualifications.

Table 2.3 Highest Formal Qualification Achieved By Respondent

Highest Formal Qualification	Male (%)	Female (%)
Tertiary	4%	17%
Certificate/Diploma	11%	21%
Trade/TAFE	10%	2%
Secondary School Completed	33%	31%
Left School Before Aged 16	42%	29%

These statistics reflect similar trends in rural regions of Eastern Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Britain, (Liepins, 1995; Teather & Kenworthy, 1996) There are a number of reasons for this persistent trend but the most common reason is that farms are more likely to be passed onto male offspring while female children are expected to be employed in other occupations. Faced with little prospect of employment in rural areas, young women often leave their families and communities and move to metropolitan centres. Nevertheless, tertiary qualified teaching staff at the local school or nurses often marry male farmers.

2.7 Why Respondents Live Where They Live

Table 2.3 shows the responses to question 5, asking why respondents live where they live. Those who responded they had come to the district for 'family reasons' were usually people who had come to the district with their families, often as young children and had continued to live in the district.

Table 2.4 Reasons Respondents Live Where They Live

Rural Division	Born here %	Work %	Lifestyle %	Family %	Marry %	Other %	No response
Campion	49	18	2	8	18	2	2
Hotham	42	10	4	10	23	7	4
Lakes	44	14	2	10	24	2	3

Graph 2.8 shows the overall trend of why people live where they live which corresponds with the trends generally in each of the divisions. As can be seen from table 2.3 and graph 2.8, the majority of respondents was born in the district and had chosen to stay and the next most likely reason why people live where they live is due to marriage. When the number of people who have remained in the district is considered by gender, 80 per cent of those born in the district are male which further qualifies the statement that females are more likely to leave the district than males. As shown in the introduction, overall for the last 35 years more men have left the sector than women, but in the last 10 years, that trend has slowed, with younger women being more likely to leave than any other group. Women who have married in the district are less likely to have come from the district. 95 per cent of those who live where they live due to marriage are females, while the number of males who came to the district and stayed outnumbers the number of females by a ratio of three to one. When gender is considered for those who have come to the district for work and lifestyle reasons, the split is even for all three divisions.

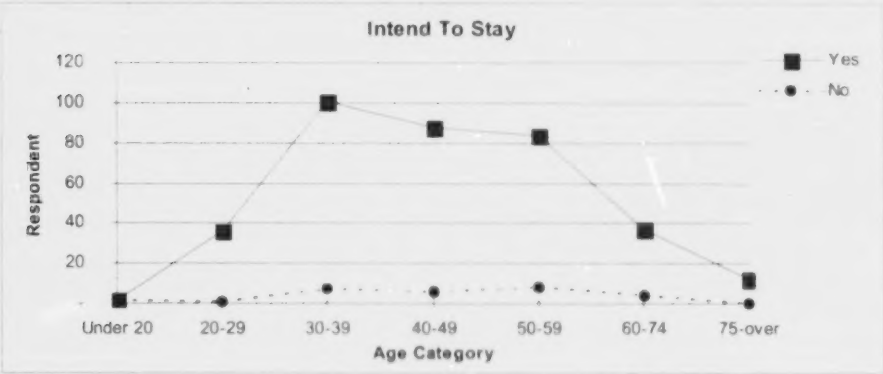
Graph 2.7 Reasons Respondents Live Where They Live

2.8 Intention of Respondents to Stay

Respondents were asked if they intended to stay in the district where they are currently living. The response in the questionnaire was overwhelmingly the affirmative with 92 per cent claiming they intended to stay as indicated in graph 2.9, and the gender split was even. The on-farm interviews and focus groups qualified some of these responses. The majority

of participants agreed that in the foreseeable future, they were committed to staying in the district, but few were certain they would stay after retirement.

Graph 2.8 Respondents Intention to Stay



2.9 Consideration of Another Profession Other Than farming

The question was asked however, whether the respondents had ever considered a profession other than farming. 41 per cent of all respondents had considered another profession. When the responses are further analysed, 29 per cent of those respondents who identified themselves as strictly farmers (296), with no other off-farm work indicated they had considered pursuing another profession. The three most often cited reasons for continuing to farm were the lifestyle, emotional ties to the farm and family responsibilities in that order, regardless of whether the respondent was strictly a farmer or had other work as well. Other research (Wright & Kaine, 1997; Halpin & Martin, 1996), has considered the importance farmers attach to the 'farming way of life'. It is a multi-faceted concept and has much to do with autonomy, living with the land, the challenge of harnessing nature and science and living in a rural community rather than an urban environment with all the latter's perceived stresses. These issues will be explored further, elsewhere in this report.

The most cited reason given, as shown in Table 2.4, for all those who had considered leaving farming was enterprise viability. The other reasons offered were spread between government policies, succession issues, family responsibilities and ties to the farm.

Table 2.5 Reasons Given for Considering Profession other than Farming, All Respondents

	% Considered Quitting
Education	10
Work experience	5
Enterprise Viability	20
Other Work	14
Family Responsibilities	14
Ties to the Farm	4
Lifestyle	8
Government Policies	13
Succession Issues	12

The reasons given by those respondents who indicated they are strictly farmers showed that enterprise viability, government policies and farm succession issues as shown in Table 2.5 are the three most usual reasons for considering another profession.

Table 2.6 Reasons Given for Considering Profession other than Farming, Strictly Farmers

	% Considered Quitting
Education	5
Work experience	4
Enterprise Viability	22
Other Work	8
Family Responsibilities	8
Ties to the Farm	5
Lifestyle	7
Government Policies	24
Succession Issues	17

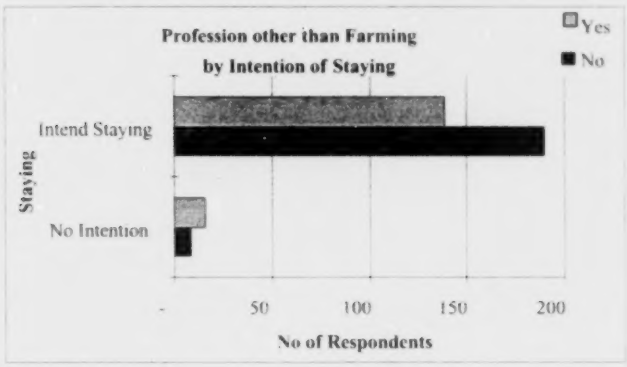
Interestingly, of those who indicated they had considered leaving farming for another profession, more men than women had considered changing, however, for those who had not considered another profession, men exceeded women. The on-farm interviews and focus group discussions conveyed a sense of 'no choice'. Many felt that leaving farming would mean leaving the community, and some had never left the community and doubted their ability to start a completely new social network outside it. Others presumed that leaving the farm immediately translates to a move to the city and like 'P' from Hotham, felt

> *Things would have to get a lot worse than this before I lowered my standards to that!*

Interestingly also, an interviewee from Campion who had responded to the questionnaire that she and her family intended to stay in the district, had five months later sold their farm,

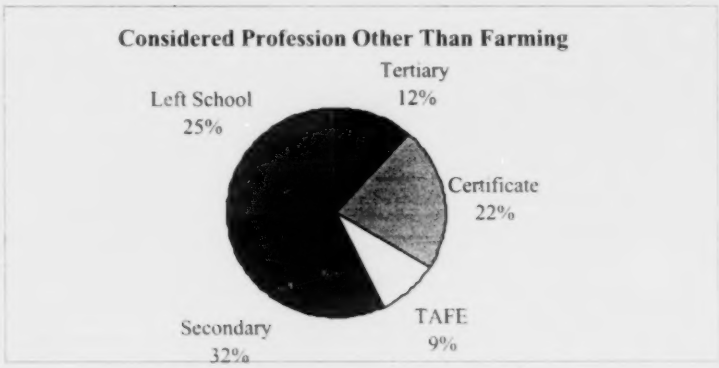
(unwillingly) and were preparing to move to Perth within the next month. The ambiguity of the responses can be gauged by Graph 2.9. This graph shows many of those people who have considered another profession are also those people who intend staying in the district, which as explained earlier, is unlikely to have many full-time employment opportunities in any other industry sector but agriculture.

Graph 2.9 Intention to Stay in the District of Those Who have Considered Another Profession Other Than farming

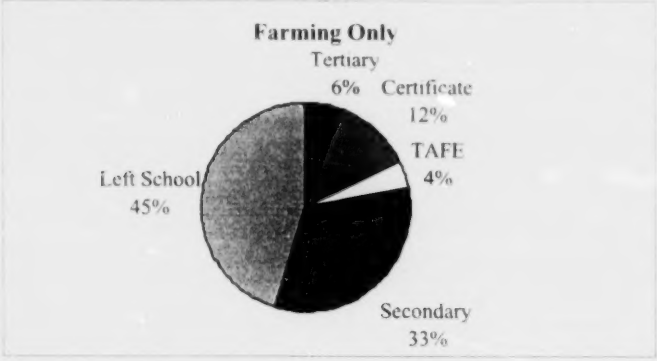


It is also interesting to note the educational background and age of those who have considered another profession. Graphs 2.10.1 and 2.10.2 show the highest formal qualifications of those who have considered leaving farming.

Graph 2.10.1 Highest Qualifications of those Considering a Profession other than Farming, All Respondents.

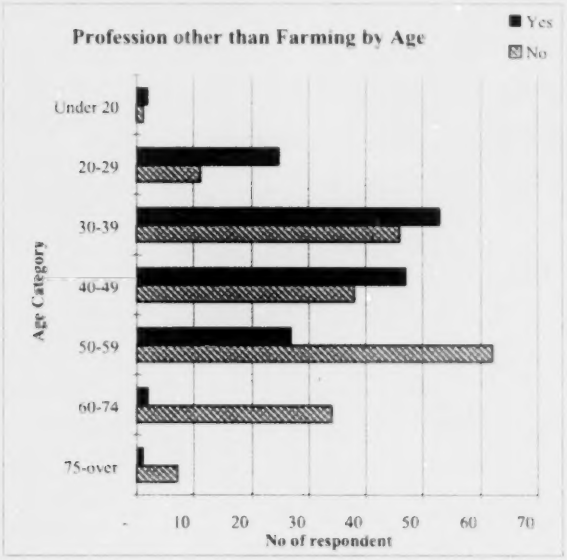


Graph 2.10.2 Highest Qualifications of those Considering a Profession other than Farming, Strictly Farmers.



It cannot be determined from this research whether having tertiary or technical skills provides some farmers with a career option should they leave farming and pursue another profession. It could also be argued that modern farming demands all farmers have some knowledge of marketing, chemicals, technology, finance, business planning, agronomy and a broad range of other areas. This can equip farmers with basic academic qualifications that offer a potential employer a wide scope of technical and practical skills. Graph 2.11 shows the age distribution of those who have considered another profession.

Graph 2.11 Profession other than Farming by Age



It would seem from this graph that farmers who fall into the age bracket where they are likely to have dependent families are those most likely to be considering another profession than farming. The trends shown here concur with the findings of Stayner (1997). Older farmers are less likely to take risks and the farm may be their only store of wealth to provide for retirement while younger farmers may be more willing to take up another occupation, as they have longer to gain a return on their 'investment' in retraining and relocation.

2.10 The Likelihood of the Next Generation Remaining in the District

The responses to this question indicated that most parents would like their children to stay in the district. The presumption for many was that at least one of their sons would return to the farm and that their daughters would leave because there were few job opportunities for them. 'N' from Hotham typified many on-farm interview responses.

I/viewer *(Daughter) has left the district. Is that a regular thing that daughters leave?*

'N' *Yes, there are no work opportunities.*

I/viewer *What about sons, do most sons come back on the farm?*

'N' *All depends on how many you have got, if you have three or four on a small farm you are buggered, one could probably go on it and the other two, don't know what you do with them, give them an apprenticeship in some trade or go to university.*

There were occasional comments that indicated that a daughter would be equally welcomed with the sons, home to the farm, but it was usually assumed that if a daughter was to remain in the local area of her parents, she would marry locally. Many parents did not respond directly to the question but added in the 'comments' that the choice was entirely that of their children and they would not influence their children's decision. Many parents were also concerned that the farm enterprise would not be viable if another adult and a future family were to return to the farm. This is further discussed in chapter 5.

Table 2.6 shows the actual results to the question whether parents would like their children to return to the district. It does not, however, indicate the reservations (which were expressed in the focus group discussions and on-farm interviews), by many parents had about their children's future nor the enterprise viability if their children did choose to return to the family enterprise.

Table 2.7 Parent's Desire for Children to Stay in the District

	Children to stay		
Age Category of Respondent	Yes	No	No Response
Under 20	1	1	3
20-29	32	3	4
30-39	85	14	12
40-49	67	19	10
50-59	63	15	15
60-74	26	8	7
75-over	10	-	2
No Response	-	-	2
Total	284	60	55

The interviews gave many respondents the opportunity to discuss the issues. Many admitted that, sentimentally, they would like their children to return, but logically, most felt their children would be able to earn a living more easily pursuing a career other than farming and have advised their children of their views. 'M' from Campion typified many of the conversations.

'M' I don't want to see them being farmers. There is more to life. It is a good lifestyle for the kids, but it is all too consuming and such hard work. I have spoken with a few women, they would all be happy to see the back of it and do something else. I want the kids to experience a lot more of life before they settle down on a farm or something – but ultimately, its what ever make them happy.

Farming businesses are unusual because it is still not uncommon for farms to be passed from one generation to the next, whereas for most family businesses in other sectors, there is usually a firm business plan and sale strategy worked out before the next generation takes over, (if at all). The manner in which this is done on farms is often problematic, (this will be discussed later in the document). However, there is evidence that there is an increasing likelihood that the next generation does not want to farm. *The Farm Weekly Rural Women's Survey* (Haslam McKenzie, 1997) data shows that 54 per cent of the next generation surveyed in the central Wheatbelt region do not want to farm. Returns and margins are difficult to predict, farming is increasingly technical and multi-skilled which does not suit everyone and it is no longer acceptable that farming is a low skill occupation. The short term and long term implications of the youth drain in the region is economically and socially significant. This will be discussed in a later chapter.

3. The Business of Farming

As Australia became an active member of the global economy and less tied to traditional European markets, there has been increasing pressure on farmers to be ever more efficient to meet the challenges of globalisation. Increasingly, policies to protect farmers from global market trends were regarded as not in the long term interests of farmers and in any case were becoming difficult to maintain in a small economy. International trends drove many of the challenges. By the mid-1980s, it was realised that world debt was continuing to climb, almost unheeded, the gap between poor and rich countries was widening rather than declining, and there was a growing awareness that economic growth was having a catastrophic effect on the environment (Catley, 1996). Furthermore, the delegitimisation of socialism as a viable political means of solving the problem of under-development led to a redefinition of the role of the state, worldwide and a general trend to neo-liberal economic and political policies. As a result, Australian farmers had to shift their focus from being production driven to being market driven when successive governments initiated a process of economic reforms designed to integrate the Australian economy into global circuits of capital (Tonts, 1996). These reforms included the deregulation of finance and banking industries, the freeing of interest rates, the floating of the exchange rate, and the partial deregulation of statutory marketing authorities such as the Australian Wheat Board. Alongside these changes the Federal government pursued a liberalisation of international trade at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and has progressively reduced the level of import tariffs and restrictions, while Australia's principle competitors, the USA and European Union, have continued export subsidies of their agricultural industries. Furthermore, for more than a decade, the government at both State and Federal levels has been committed to micro-economic reform and non-intervention policies. Restructuring associated with deregulation and the opening of Australian markets to international competition has had a substantial impact on regions.

Australia's share of world trade has been declining steadily over the last forty years. It halved between 1955 and 1975 from 2.2 per cent to about 1.2 per cent at a time when great international prosperity, coupled with a growth of free trade sentiments on the part of governments (formalised through GATT), led to a massive increase in world trade (Walmsley & Sorensen, 1993, p.71). In the 1950s, wool accounted for 50 per cent of the value of Australian exports, but by the 1990s, accounts for less than 5 per cent. Metals, minerals and manufacturing constitute the lion's share of Australia's exports. Meawhile, more successful economies have concentrated on the development of 'value adding' particularly in the agricultural sector.

Statistics regarding the income gap between the highest and lowest performing farms throughout Australia are not new, but the rate at which it is expanding is emerging as a significant issue for the agricultural industry and policy makers. According to the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) study (1998) of national farm incomes from 1995-6 to 1997-8, top performing broadacre farms earned cash incomes which were more than double the average for farms of similar size, enterprise type and locations. Rates of return for the top performing group were more than four times the average, and farm family income was almost double the average. In 1990-1, top performing farms in the sheep/wheat zone generated an extra $65 000 in income compared to the

average farms. By 1997-8, it had increased to more than $100 000. Inflation may account for some of this increase, nonetheless, it has been reported (ABARE, 1998) that the gap in performance between the high and low performers has widened because top performing farms have increased the total value of their output while also maintaining low cost production systems. In addition, the unit value of outputs has either improved or fallen by relatively less than that of the bottom performers. Profit margins for top performing farms increased during the 1990s, while profit margins fell for the bottom performing group. The 1999 Farm Surveys Report predicts that, Australia wide, 30% of broadacre farms will lose money in 1998-99.

3.1 Farm Income and Disposable Income 1987-97

The questionnaire differentiated between farm income and disposable income. Farm income is referred to in this report, as the overall operating income available to the farm business, while disposable income is that income available to the farm business after all expenses and operating costs are met, (the income available for non-business purposes). It could be argued that disposable income may have been interpreted in this study as either a measured variable or a subjective variable because different people, even those in the same enterprise, could treat some expenditures as necessary operating costs while others may view the same expense as something 'extra' and dispensable from a business point of view. Furthermore, the questionnaire asked respondents to consider the adequacy of their farm income. This is a subjective judgement, but the purpose of the research was to better understand farmers' frame of reference and their interpretation of their livelihood. It was expected that respondents would report that their actual farm income had increased due to increased acreages, better technology and research advances but it was emphasised by all interviewees that the costs of inputs in the last ten years had far exceeded the increase in returns.

Most farmers in the Western Australian Central Wheatbelt have mixed farms, with sheep and wheat predominating. While the world wool markets have remained feeble this decade, flocks have decreased and the acreage devoted to cropping has increased. Chemicals and fertilisers are usually costed in US dollars, which means that as the Australian dollar remains weak against the US dollar, Australian farmers' inputs bill increases. While it can be argued that a weak Australian dollar enhances competitiveness of Australian products in the international marketplace, while there are still US and EU export subsidies in place, it is not a 'level playing field'. Furthermore, while low interest rates facilitate loans at a manageable rate, many farmers argue that to service the loans, the business has to generate income and for many, farming does not do that adequately. For those farmers wanting to save or invest, low interest rates generate small returns, limiting opportunities for business and income diversity. Overall therefore many of the interviewees for this project, particularly those in Hotham, claimed that low interest rates and a weak Australian dollar have exacerbated the intensity of their farm financial crisis and as a consequence, even though farm incomes may have increased, disposable income had not necessarily done the same.

Typical of many farmers, 'N' and 'T' both from different subdivisions in Hotham, explained during the interviews, how their expenditure over the last ten years has changed.

Farmer 'N' (Hotham).

N. *Everything seems to be going up all the time and our produce is either stagnating or dropping down.*

I/viewer *What sort of costs have you incurred to make life more difficult for you?*

N. *Just with the Asian crisis, the super, compound fertilizer are going up $35 a tonne and say, with a hundred tonne, there is another $3,500 just by not doing anything.*

I/viewer *Has the Asian crisis made that worse?*

N. *That and the devaluation of the dollar, that is the excuse.*

Farmer 'T' (Hotham).

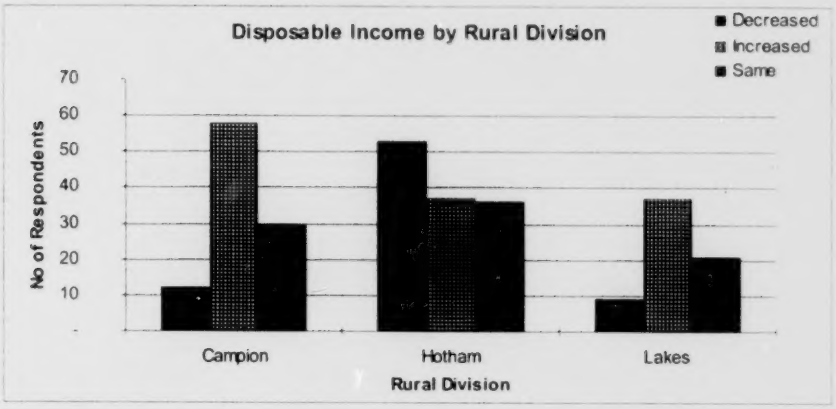
T. *Ten years ago 80% of our income was wool and 20% of our income was cereals. 100% of that was oats, now about half the farm goes into crop so about 40% of the income now comes from various crops and that is obviously because of the commodity prices. As a consequence of putting in so much more crop we haven't had the machinery and a good deal of our income has gone into tooling up for cropping. I can assure you we are in a worse position now than we were ten years ago when wool prices started to go down.*

I/viewer *What about, in those ten years, the cost of fertilizer, chemicals, has that had a significant affect on the disposable income?*

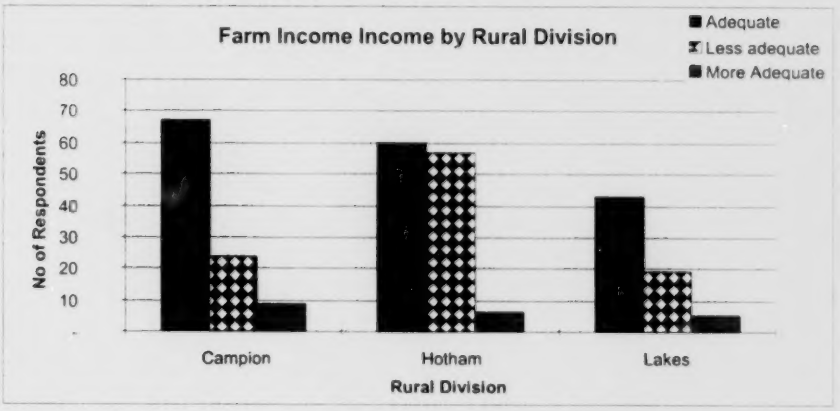
T. *Quite undoubtedly. Our machinery hasn't been big enough to put in the size of the program we have put in so we have had to use fertilizers as opposed to the conventional ways we used to do it, so fertilizers have gone from zero costs to about $35,000 worth of costs.*

The following graphs show the survey responses to the question regarding adequacy of farm income in each statistical division, over the last ten years. It is acknowledged that the graphs are comparing an assumed measured variable (disposable income) with a subjective variable (adequacy from farm income), but the aim was to understand farmers' perceptions of their business and lifestyle viability.

Graphs 3.1.1 Disposable Income 1987-97

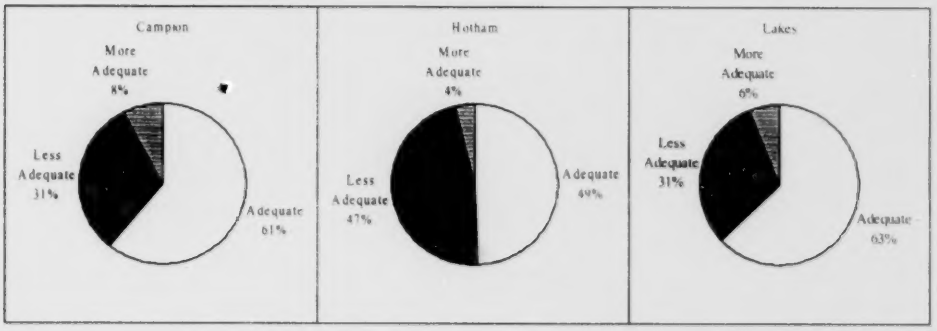


Graph 3.1.2 Adequacy of Farm Income 1987-97



Graph 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 show the same graphs (above), in percentages, to give an overall picture of farm income changes in the region over the ten year period.

Graph 3.2.1 Adequacy of Farm Income 1987-97



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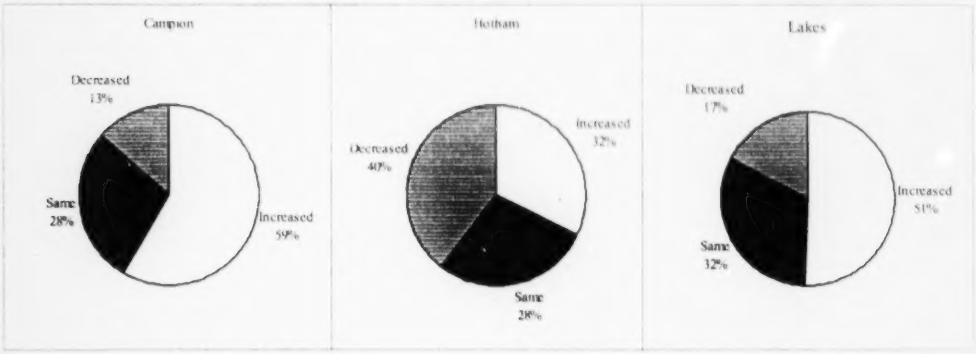
Graphs 3.2.1 indicate that while 31 per cent of respondents in Lakes and Campion found their farm income over the last ten years was less than adequate, almost half (47 per cent) of the respondents in Hotham found that to be the case. Furthermore, when disposable income (graphs 3:2) is considered, there are more than twice as many respondents from Hotham who report that their disposable income has decreased in the last ten years, than from the other two divisions.

Graph 3.2.2 Disposable Income1987-97



There are a number of possible explanations for this marked difference. As seen on Map 1, Hotham is the statistical division closest to the coast and it receives a considerably higher rainfall than the other two divisions. It has traditionally been a predominantly wool producing rather than a cropping region but as wool has declined many farmers in this division have invested heavily in cropping and the cost of diversifying is high. The Lakes and Campion are topographically flat and well suited to cropping.

The statistics also showed that on some farms, even though the farm income is considered adequate or more than adequate, the disposable income has actually decreased. Of the respondents who claimed that their farm income had either remained static or increased, 15% claimed that their disposable income had actually decreased. This is most likely when there has been an increase in cropping or other income generating activities, but the business outgoings have also increased. As mentioned earlier the costs of fertiliser, technology and chemicals have all increased, as have freight and information.

3.2 Farm Enterprise Responses to Income Pressures

Farmers throughout the Central Wheatbelt have tried a number of strategies in the last ten years to maintain or increase both their farm and disposable incomes. Despite the numbers of farmers withdrawing from the agricultural sector and the challenges facing many of the remaining farmers in the Central Wheatbelt, there are farm enterprises that are performing well, some of whom will be profiled in the next section. The Review of the Rural Adjustment Scheme also noted that there were segments in the farm sector that were performing well. The Review's analysis of broadacre farm performance identified farm size, in terms of cash receipts, as an important factor in improving farm performance.

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However, the Review also concludes that at all levels of farm size good management can significantly enhance farm business performance. Table 3.1 summarises the strategies adopted by Central Wheatbelt farmers in response to the pressures on their incomes. A number of these responses were discussed at length during the on-farm interviews and focus groups.

Table 3.1 Strategies Used to Increase Disposable Income 1987-97 (Hotham, Lakes & Campion)

Income Increase Category		
Increased cropping program	288	63%
Increased use of fertilizer	247	73%
Increased number of animals	105	27%
Foregone conservation program	92	23%
Looked for off-farm income	122	31%
Sold off or leased land	47	12%
Increased acreage	173	44%
Increased overdraft/debt	182	46%
Foregone paying labour	144	36%
Foregone professional advice	52	13%
Forgone training	37	9%
Bartered goods & services with neighbors	93	23%
Other	34	9%

For many, the cost of diversifying has necessitated a large capital investment as well as an increase in landholding. For others, changing the way they farm is not a comfortable experience as 'D' from Hotham explained their change in focus.

'D' Our business is mostly sheep, but we are trying to get into cropping, trees and whatever we can to make more (money) now. Because of the falling wool industry we are having to try and make a bit of money out of other things but by preference we are sheep farmers, wool growers and proud of it.

The various strategies will be explored, with a particular focus on business viability and sustainability.

Overdraft

The survey showed that 46 per cent of all respondents in all three statistical divisions had increased their overdraft in the last 10 years. Of all the Hotham respondents, 57 per cent had increased their overdraft in the last ten years, while 43 per cent in Lakes and 42 per cent in Campion had borrowed more capital. This can be extremely stressful because seasons and rainfall are highly variable in these areas. Furthermore, Australian farmers are selling their produce in de-regulated markets with few government subsidies and the cash surpluses are often not sufficient to be able to fully service debts. The *Rural Adjustment Management Change*, mid-term review of the Rural Adjustment Scheme (1997, p. 34) noted that "most of the top operators of medium and large sized farms earned an average rate of return on their equity that was greater than the cost of borrowed funds. By contrast, the borrowing

practices of many of the remaining farms appear to be unsustainable". The Report also acknowledged that operators of small farm, and many medium and large farms, achieved rates of return less than the financing costs of borrowed funds. Declining real prices received by farmers are compounded by rising real costs of production. Even though interest rates are attractive, climatic conditions and international economic and political circumstances cannot be controlled and some farm businesses have succumbed to the pressures. Table 3.2 shows that in the ten years 1986/7-96/7 the number of farms in the central Wheatbelt has decreased by almost 10 per cent but the total area being farmed has remained about the same.

Table 3:2 Number of Farms and Area of Farms, 1986/7-1996/7

	1996/7	1986/7	% difference
Number of farms in Campion, Lakes & Hotham	2 749	3051	[-] 10%
Total area farmed ('000ha)	6607	6604	negligible

ABS 7411.5; AgStats 1997

Since the early 1990's figures from ABARE have shown that an increasing number of farmers throughout the country are receiving a negative farm income. As identified by Bryant (1992), the consequence of reduced farm income together with escalating debt means that a higher proportion of income is used to service the debt. Given the continuing economic pressures on some farmers, particularly those in the Hotham division, it is to be expected that the numbers of farmers are likely to continue to decrease. Furthermore, it is likely that farmers under sustained economic and social strain cannot farm in an environmentally sound manner, even though unsound or inefficient practices may be against the better judgement and values of farmers. They tend to be pragmatic, pursuing short term strategies rather than adhering to long term plans.

D and C from Campion explained:

'C' People tend to buy more land in order to make the property viable for two incomes and what tends to happen down the track is that it doesn't work. They are dying to be on their own, but the banks have a responsibility; they would do well to have some sort of farm succession farming process. It seems to me that people tend to chase their tails, they buy this big property, they service a big debt, the debt then prevents home improvements, the new wife feels frustrated, and in my experience the farm usually goes due to the tension.

'D' I agree with that entirely. Just at the moment, even though the Yilgarn has had two very good years I cannot believe the amount of land that is going on the market, nor can I believe the price they are paying for it. Because the farmers believe they have to increase their holdings to be more viable (and) are paying these huge amounts of money. We are finding that we are multiple cropping more so than ever before to try and get more out of what we actually own, and that is to the detriment of the land.

Some of the many issues raised in this quote will be addressed later in the report.

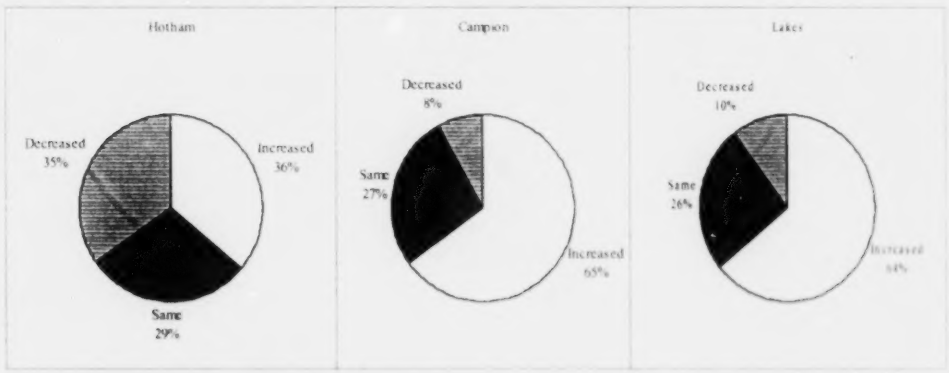
Increased Acreage and Cropping Programs

It has been established by Martin, (1996) that on average, larger Australian farms have significantly higher productivity levels, higher turnover and debt levels and generally positive rates of return than smaller farms. That is, significant economies of scale have been more profitable for more farmers. For more than ten years, farmers throughout the Central Wheatbelt, have had a desire/need to increase their acreage. Overall, 44 per cent of all respondents had increased their acreage in the last ten years. The interviews revealed that many of the increased holdings are not contiguous to the original property and consequently there are some inefficiencies associated with several holdings spread over a sometimes, large area. The most spread out farm holding was owned by the 'A' family enterprise in Campion.

'D' *One of the farms here we have is 4,400 acres and the other farm, 80kms south we have 3,100 and 40 kms south of here we have 9,000 acres. At Hopetoun (500 kms south) we have another 7,500 acres which we farm with my brother.*

Farmers have been convinced that increased holdings will bring economies of scale and higher returns. It is therefore interesting to ascertain the validity of this assumption. Graphs 3.4 shows the relationship between disposable income and increased acreage over the last ten years.

Graph 3:4 Disposable Income and Increased Acreage 1987-97



These graphs indicate that as a farm enterprise has increased acreage in Campion and Lakes, there is a greater likelihood of disposable income increasing, however only half as many in Hotham who increased their acreage had an increase in their disposable income. Similarly, as shown in graph 3.5, the same trend emerges when farm income is considered. It should be of concern however, that even though there is a smaller percentage of farmers in Campion and Lakes whose disposable income has decreased than is the case for farmers in Hotham, 31 per cent of farmers in both Campion and Lakes claim that their farm income is less than adequate even as their acreage has increased. If this trend persists, it is unlikely that the farmers in these divisions will continue pursuing this strategy. If all else remains the same, it is likely to impact on the way people view their future as farmers and may have an impact on population shifts.

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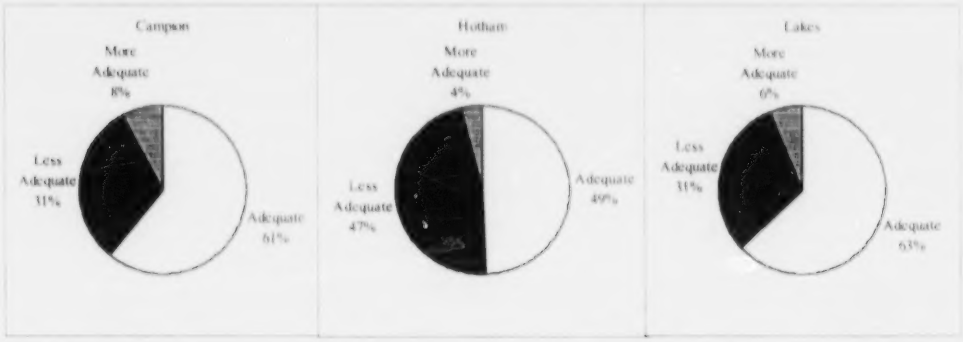
Graph 3:5 Farm Income Adequacy and Increased Acreage 1987-97



During the interviews, farmers whose disposable income had increased were spoken to as well as those whose viability was threatened because of the costs associated with increased land holding. Those farmers whose disposable income had increased were generally comfortable with their enterprise and industry; a number voiced concerns that there was too much doom and gloom in farming communities and the rural media in particular. (Some of these will be profiled in the next section). On the other hand, many interviewees, such as "H" of Campion, were unsure of their future as farmers and were perpetually struggling to remain viable.

'H' *Yes, but we always had a son that wanted only to come home (to the farm). The aim was always 'you had to get bigger or you would go under', and each time we bought a farm we would say this is it, another 1,000 acres and we will be big enough, we can support two families, but by the time you pay for that in five or six years time all the costs have gone up, you are not getting anymore for your product so it is 'Oh dear this will never support two families, we'd better go and buy another 1000 acres .....' Especially when my son wanted only to be a farmer..... so the idea was to try and set it up to be big enough to sustain two families.*

Much of the increased land holding is devoted to an increased cropping program. Lakes and Campion divisions are both well suited to cropping, although there are significant areas that are salt affected. 73 per cent of all the respondents had increased their cropping program in the last ten years, but once again, in Hotham this is only likely to translate to increased disposable income in only 30 per cent of cases as shown in graph 3.6.

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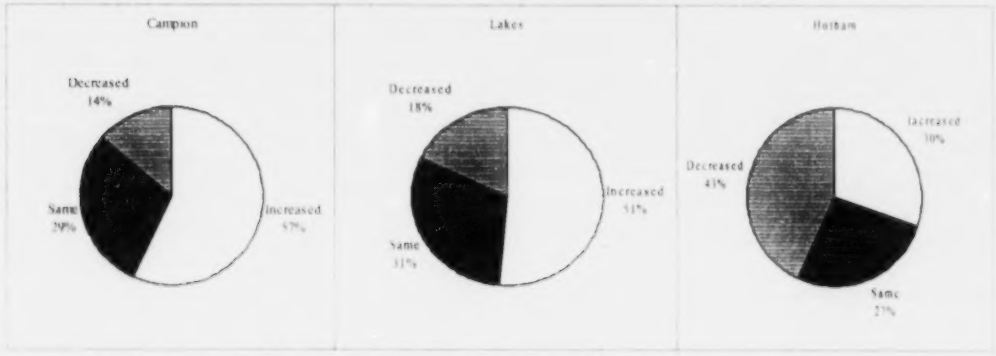
Graph 3:6 Increased Cropping and Disposable Income 1987-97



Climatically and geographically, Hotham is excellent grazing country but some areas, particularly the southern and western areas of the division, are not especially suited to cropping. Nonetheless, farmers such as the 'J' family in south west Hotham have reluctantly gone into cropping.

J. The fact that at this stage this property actually doesn't keep up totally, well it does but we have had to borrow more and it worries me greatly that one day if he (son) marries how are we going to keep two families? That is probably my biggest worry at this stage of our lives.

I/viewer When you say you have borrowed more, is that for operating costs?

J. The thing was we were totally grazing for many years which, when we had the reserve wool price of course, we couldn't really farm any more efficiently per acre. We had 10,000 sheep which (husband) and I managed to do by ourselves with contract labor coming in for the big jobs. But then of course that ceased and we should have turned to cropping sooner but a) we didn't have the equipment, b) we didn't have the labor and so we limped along with our wool but we should have started changing over a lot sooner.

I/viewer How much of your property do you crop?

J I think this year we are going to crop about 1200 acres, just under half of the farm.

I/viewer Did you have to turn around and get tractors etc?

J Yes all of that. Of course that obviously is quite expensive but we actually did have a bit of other money put away which we put back in the farm to fund some of that expense.

A significant number of farmers have pursued the same combination of strategies with mixed success in terms of their disposable income, as shown in Graph 3:7. These farmers have increased their cropping program, increased the application of fertiliser, increased the number of animals and increased their overdraft.

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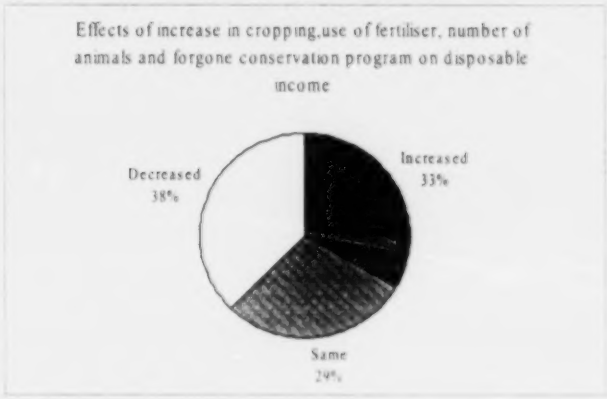
Graph 3:7 Farmers who have increased cropping program, use of fertiliser, number of animals and overdraft.


Effects of increase in cropping,use of fertiliser, number of animals and forgone conservation program on disposable income
Decreased 38%
Increased 33%
Same 29%

As can be seen from this graph, 38 per cent of these farmers have extended themselves financially and still their disposable income has decreased. It cannot be assessed from this data what the income status of these farm enterprises would be now had they not spent that extra capital, although 'T' in Hotham has certainly thought about it.

'T' *Yes, I have thought about it, although I would prefer not to. My neighbour is a very good farmer, although he hasn't got kids in boarding school and all those sorts of frills, but he has not got himself involved in a lot of the new age farming stuff that I have spent money on, you know, all the fertilisers, smart machinery, agronomists and new holdings. He hasn't got the debt and his farm is in tip top condition. He doesn't flog it. I sometimes wonder if I have been greedy and I pay for that by losing sleep over where my next payments are coming from. I don't think (neighbour) has ever lost a wink worrying.*

Off-farm Income

Recent research, (Lloyd & Malcolm, 1997; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997), has emphasised the growing importance of off-farm income to the viability of family farms in Australia. This was confirmed by the findings of this project. It was indicated by 31 per cent of respondents to question 24 that off-farm income has been sought in the last ten years to increase disposable income. The on-farm interviews revealed that off-farm income is a complex subject and can be sought for a number of reasons. The social and other reasons will be further explored in another part of this report. Nonetheless, 23 per cent of respondents indicated that off-farm income was necessary for the viability of the farm enterprise. Table 3:3 shows the percentage of responses to the necessity of off-farm income and its perceived effect on disposable income.

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Table 3:3 Off-farm Income and its effect on Disposable Income

	Off-farm Income	
Disposable Income	**Necessary**	**Not necessary**
Decreased	40%	48%
Increased	50%	45%
Same	44%	46%

The focus group discussions revealed the on-farm costs of off-farm employment. The time and cost of travelling distances were cited, but also the cost and lack of available replacement labour at critical times during the farming year were also mentioned. Childcare and the potentially dangerous mix of children and farming often prevented women from taking off-farm employment, even when the need for the extra income was dire. The on-farm interviews exposed some coyness by farmers when discussing the nature of off-farm income. This may, in part, explain the gap between those farmers (23 per cent) who indicated they need off-farm income to remain viable and yet there are about 46 per cent of farmers who claim their farm income is less than adequate. The on-farm interviews and focus groups also revealed that many farmers have off-farm investments that generate an important income source, particularly for disposable income purposes. When discussing active off-farm work, some farmers were particularly sensitive about their own activities. Most farmers acknowledged the female partner's off-farm work but would either not admit or dismiss the male off-farm contribution. An example is 'H' in Hotham.

I/viewer *Do you have any other off farm income?*

'H' *No.*

I/viewer *Does your wife not work?*

'H' *Yes, part-time at TAFE.*

I/viewer *Would you say then that the off farm work is supporting the farm?*

'H' *It is not supporting the farm at all, it is contributing to supporting the farm.*

I/viewer *Could you say that disposable income is generated by off farm income? The question is, does the farm furnish itself but the off farm income provides the disposable income?*

'H' *The off farm income contributes to the disposable income, but there is no way that it is the entire disposable income.*

I/viewer *The farm provides for some disposable income.*

'H' *Yes.*

I/viewer *Can you give me a percentage?*

'H' *The off farm income would be about 40 per cent*

'H's wife had responded separately to the questionnaire and indicated that she wished to be interviewed also. Her interview revealed that her husband also had a substantial seasonal off-farm income. Later, over a meal in a social situation, the subject of off-farm income was raised. It was mentioned that 'H's off-farm work had been established eight years before with the long term plan of preparing for their children's boarding education expenses, but now, that income was an important component of the annual operating budget.

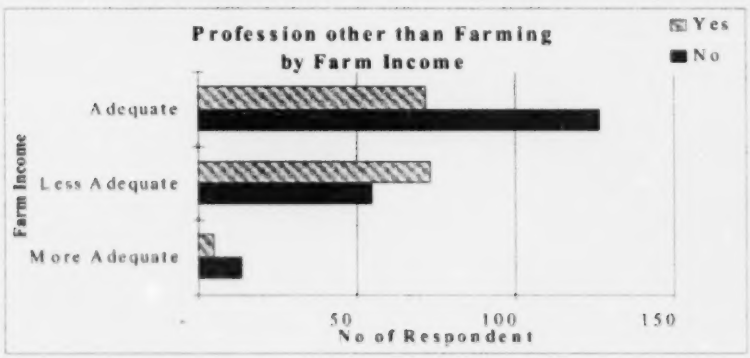
'H' *Eight years ago we started contract harvesting with the hope of paying off a relatively new header, and the boarding school fees pretty much paid for as the kids went to school. We are well and truly on track for that the only problem is that commodity prices have gone down so much the harvesting enterprise has grown considerably bigger than we ever intended it to be and it is now supporting the farm. Don't know where the school fees will come from.*

Off-farm income does not necessarily mean any of the farm family works off-farm. A large number of interviewees had shares and income earning residential property in Perth. Nonetheless, the income was used for disposable income purposes.

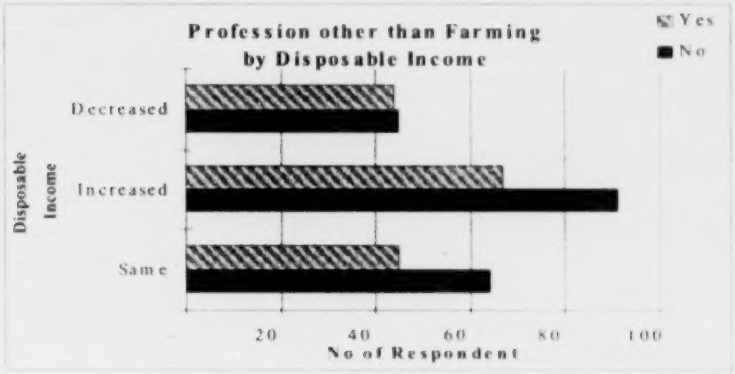
Farmers Considering Leaving Farming

As discussed in an earlier chapter, a considerable number of farmers have considered a profession other than farming. 41 per cent of all respondents have considered this option while 29 per cent of those respondents who identified themselves as strictly farmers (296), have thought about it. The viability of the enterprise was the most often cited reasons for considering leaving the sector. This is borne out by graphs 3.8.1 and 3.8.2. However, as can be seen in these graphs, other considerations apart from viability influence a farm enterprise decision to continue to quit farming. As discussed elsewhere in this report, age, education and other work opportunities influence the decision as do family considerations such as succession planning and emotional ties to the farm.

Graph 3.8.1 Profession other than Farming Considered, by Farm Income



Graph 3.8.2 Profession other than Farming Considered, by Disposable Income.



These graphs indicate that even those farmers whose income is adequate and/or has increased have been tempted to consider another profession. An example of this scenario was 'I' in eastern Campion whose family situation became so frustrating he considered leaving the enterprise, even though the business was profitable and he had basic formal qualifications.

'I' *The problems had been there a long time but over a few months we went to dad and said "Its not working, what do you want to do? If you want to stay we will go, if you want to go we will stay. We even looked at some other businesses down through [region closer to Perth].*

The qualitative data collection process for this project showed that farm succession and other family issues are having a significant impact upon the future of farming. The generation of a farm income and how it is divided between the members of the enterprise are sources of conflict and appear to be directly influencing participant's tenure to their community and profession.

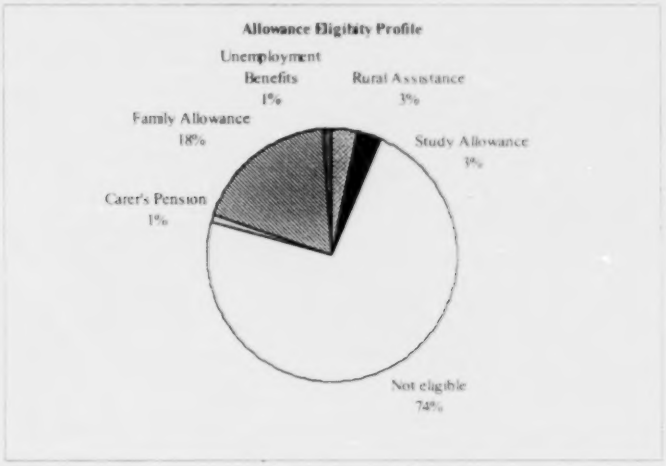
Eligibility for Assistance

Even though a significant number of farm enterprises appear to be struggling to remain viable, few claimed they are eligible for government assistance, despite the recent changes in social security arrangements for farmers. 70 per cent of the respondents claimed they were not eligible for assistance even though 32 per cent of these stated their farm income was less than adequate. Many of the interviewees acknowledged the recent changes certainly acknowledged the difficulties facing farmers when their circumstances forced them to try and access social security, however the general feeling was 'they didn't go far enough'. A particular concern was tertiary education. The lack of assistance for children wanting to access tertiary education was regularly mentioned as well was the lack of understanding by government of families trying to accommodate children while they are studying away from home. 'I', (Campion) explained that he and his wife had tried to prepare for the expense of educating children, and because of their planning were denied assistance while it was given to those who had made no provision for the future needs of their children.

'I' *We planned for the kids' education 12 years ago. We started up a cash fund because at that stage we were managing the farm because dad owned it and we had to come up with the costs (for future education) out of our wage. When the family supplement allowance came in we weren't allowed it because we had saved up, doing the right thing. We have neighbors who have blown all their money by buying all this stuff, and now they get the allowance. For doing the right thing we were penalized and for the people doing the wrong thing, they got all the perks.*

The perception that government support is haphazard appears to be borne out in part from the survey results, which are illustrated in Graph 3.9.

Graph 3.9 Allowance Eligibility



Of those whose farm income is adequate or more adequate, 15 per cent received family allowance while only 35 per cent of those who claimed their farm income was less than adequate received the family allowance, although it is acknowledged that 'adequate' is a subjective descriptor.

Only 3% of all respondents indicated they received study allowance. 'J' from Hotham explained the financial impact on her farm enterprise when two of their children were being educated at two different tertiary institutions.

'J' *I know you can get help for isolated children for tertiary education, but of course it is means tested, and it (the government) does not take anything but the value of our business into account. I just think with tertiary education it is dreadful. It shouldn't be means tested if you have to live outside the city. I think country people should be given some help. In our case, we had two children at uni in different towns so they couldn't even share accommodation, as one happened to be in Perth and one in Northam regardless of whether they live on campus or not. We don't have any alternative. Accommodation for country kids is a difficult thing and very expensive.*

As the focus group data indicated, the conflict caused by pressures on disposable income can result in poor business decisions. When families are confronted by expenses such as 'J'

outlined, they are forced to prioritise their spending and it is items such as Landcare, water conservation, training and preventative measures (such as drenching, backburning, weed control) that are compromised while at the same time choosing to pursue other cash generation strategies. One participant agisted stock and admitted to bringing onto his property lice infested sheep which had cost him more than he earned, while another had tried diversifying into emus, just as that market faltered. Others, as discussed later, commute between the city and the farm, completely changing the way they farm. They have sold all their stock and concentrate on cropping which is actually more profitable for them, but results in the family no longer living in the community.

3.3 Successful Central Wheatbelt Farm Enterprises

Despite the generally pessimistic overview of broadacre farming in the Central Wheatbelt, a number of small business owners in the region were interviewed who stood out for their success and longevity in a predominantly negative economic environment. Generally they fitted the mid-term review of the Rural Adjustment Scheme (1997, p. 34), which suggested profitable farm enterprises were more likely to be farmers who are competent financial and resource managers that recognise and are able to respond to the challenges induced by the changing agricultural environment. Conventional measures of success such as growth and profitability were not the only criteria used to measure success because these are not always congruent with the individual goals and objectives of the enterprise owners. In all cases, the respondents determined their own definition of success, but there were common elements that included economic viability and sustainability at their particular location, lifestyle choices, autonomy and individual challenges.

Only one of the businesses was not a broadacre farm. It is a farm supply business situated at a railway siding 25 kilometers from the closest town and competitors. The husband and wife team have intimate knowledge of their clients' farming operations built up over twenty years and their focus is service. They strive to keep up with new trends, products, practices and research through international farm chemical networks, trade magazines and the state based agricultural service, AgWA. They also provide an on-farm transport service, and whenever possible, offer a back-loading service.

The successful broadacre farmers have adopted a variety of strategies to remain profitable farmers. Two grain growers have responded to the challenges offered by the deregulated grain market and sell the bulk of their grain crops to the domestic feedgrains industry. For many farmers, the domestic market lacks a certain prestige, but as both these farmers agree, 'there is no prestige in going broke'. Both farmers, like many others, have also diversified their crops. One of the farmers has made an arrangement with a 'boutique miller' to supply a particular grade of crop type for a two year period, guaranteeing the farmer a market and price. The deregulated domestic market has given them more latitude in their crop marketing and composition, and unlike many farmers, particularly those who farm in the traditional way, and find it difficult to change, these farmers viewed the revisions as opportunities.

Another of the farming enterprises has diversified their on-farm investment. They have developed a commercial beef feedlot on their broadacre crop farm. They have established a small beef herd which goes into the feedlot, but the bulk of the returns from the feedlot are

from taking in other farmer's cattle which they fatten on their behalf. Feedlots are new to this region. Many farmers have not had experience with cattle and there is concern regarding the availability of sufficient water for stock. This farm enterprise paid for technical advice and employed farm exchange labour from the US to provide expertise and practical advice for the planning and establishment of a commercial feedlot. The business now offers marketing advice as well as a transport service if required to other farmers using the feedlot. It provides other farmers the opportunity to diversify without the capital and knowledge costs required to set up a feedlot, enabling other farmers to concentrate on broadacre farming, their traditional livelihood. As mentioned earlier, beef feedlots require feed grains, thereby the feedlot provides a local market for some of the grain produced on their own farm as well as for neighbouring farmers.

Another strategy working well for another of these innovative farmers, is the use of the internet to create markets. This farmer is fortunate in having relatively good access to the internet and is negotiating privately with a Japanese noodle manufacturer to experiment with a combination of noodle wheats that will satisfy Japanese needs. To achieve this, the farmers have had to learn to use Australian Government marketing agencies such as AusTrade to their advantage. Both partners of this enterprise agree that their experience off-farm has been invaluable as has their tertiary qualifications in negotiating, marketing and manipulating information technology to their advantage. They recognise that there are businesses qualified to do much of this, but they consider autonomy and spontaneity of the decision-making processes to be important for their profitability.

The seven businesses, (10% of the RIRDC on-farm interviewees), summarised in Table 3.4, admitted they were successful, usually by creating a niche market or securing a niche through percipient market research or service. All were keen to encourage others 'to have a go' and determined that rural based businesses are not all necessarily doom and gloom. These businesses played a critical role in creating a milieu of success and optimism in their districts that then translated to other people and businesses.

Table 3.4 Successful Central Wheatbelt Farm Enterprises

Business	Location	Business Type *	Niche **	Education ***	Off-farm income
1	Lakes	Farm Supplier	Local/Service	H - diploma	n/a
2	Lakes	B/acre Farmer	Dom mkts	H&W degree	Yes
3	Hotham	B/acre Farmer	Dom & o/s mkts	H-Diploma W-degree	No
4	Lakes	B/acre Farmer	Feedlot	W-degree	Yes
5	Campion	B/acre Farmer	Dom mkts	H&W degree	Yes
6	Campion	B/acre Farmer	O/s mkts	H&W degree	Yes
7	Hotham	B/acre Farmer	Grain pool	H&W diploma	Yes

(* B/acre – broadacre; ** Dom – domestic; *** H – husband W – wife)

Commonalities

Unlike many farm enterprises, none of these businesses had inter-generational or intra-generational ownership. This is unusual. The farms may have belonged to previous generations in some cases but the incumbent farmer(s) had become an independent farmer(s), either by sole inheritance or by purchase. All seven businesses were owned and operated by a husband and wife team. In three of the cases, the financial arrangement facilitating ownership was still being paid through financial institutions, but to all intents and purposes, the businesses are owner/operated by one couple. The decision making, planning and marketing is the sole preserve of the incumbents, although they may choose to buy advice.

Gray and Phillips (1996, p.277) contend that farm inheritance is central to the maintenance of tradition as it provides an instrument for transmission of beliefs, values and practices. Locally derived and transmitted knowledge as a basis for farm operation is a significant aspect of farm tradition. These seven businesses were more entrepreneurial and tended to eschew traditional farming practices. Production inputs (including labour) were given an economic value and if the planned production strategy did not show a profit paying labour, then it was abandoned.

The decision to make farming a career had been made by all seven as adults. All seven enterprises had at least one partner who had been raised on a farm, but that partner had left the family farm for a variety of reasons for a number of years. Three had experienced irreconcilable differences with family members and left to work on other farm enterprises or in entirely different industries. Three others had left the farm to gain tertiary qualifications and worked in new industries; one overseas in a merchant bank; another as a solicitor and the third as a retailer. The seventh had had a variety of jobs both urban and rural based. The farm supply proprietors had lived in rural environments as children.

In each of the seven businesses, the female partner plays an active role in the enterprise. In all cases, women's participation in the business was viewed by the male and female partners as essential to the future prosperity of the enterprise and it was acknowledged that they brought to the business skill, talent and experience which complemented and enhanced those of their husband. In four of the seven farm enterprises being reviewed here, the female had superior formal qualifications to that of her husband, two were on a par and in the seventh, the male partners' formal qualifications were superior. In all cases, the female partners kept the financial records and in six businesses, were the usual business computer system operator. In general, the overall management of the enterprise was a co-operative, team effort by the partners and by being independent, the partners were able to develop business plans, production, marketing, investment and technical strategies that met only their requirements.

Five of the seven farm enterprises declared considerable off-farm investments. This was usually in shares or property. Three of the farming partnerships earn at least as much from off-farm income as on-farm. Once again, the partners agree that their experience from working off-farm has provided them with the knowledge and confidence to trade shares and/or property. Some farmers would say that these farm enterprises are successful for non-farming reasons and therefore cannot be considered successful farmers. The three farm enterprises would disagree. They claim their farm is better because they have the capital to support sustainable farming practices, such as water conservation, tree planting and soil

reconditioning. They also do not have to farm intensively, unlike many of their neighbours, to receive the returns the family needs and two of the three enterprises have been able to afford to pioneer and refine farming practices used elsewhere in the world. All three businesses argue that off-farm income enables them to farm responsibly, enjoy the lifestyle they have chosen for their family and pursue innovative farm practices that they believe will provide long term returns.

Each of these business owners had made a conscious decision to work in the agricultural industry fully knowing the marginal returns and difficult social milieu in most rural regions. Furthermore, each had experienced other professions, but decided the agricultural industry was their preferred option. Economic considerations were not the only determinants: autonomy, the rural lifestyle, rural communities, working with animals and crops, pitting the business against nature and for one, pursuing quite maverick marketing strategies were listed as reasons for choosing to be a farmer rather than another profession.

3.4 Land Viability and Sustainability

Salinity and rising water tables are a persistent problem throughout the three statistical divisions. There has been concern that some farmers are overcropping and overstocking in order to generate sufficient cash flows to remain economically viable. This issue was raised during the on-farm interviews and the focus groups. Many expressed the view that such practices are short lived because use of these strategies rarely ensure long term viability. Nonetheless, concerns such as those expressed by the 'A' family in Campion were not uncommon.

> *Our (farmers generally) land management side of it has got to become a lot better than what it is by some farmers in the area, they are flogging their land just to get more and more tonnes in per (sic) the total farm area. But when they go to sell that land they are paying money for rubbish because it is worn out, it has happened just recently.*

On-farm interviewees indicated that farm enterprises usually spent as much as their budget would allow on Landcare and sustainability strategies. This does however vary between farmers and seasons. 'T' in Lakes was typical of the responses.

> *'T' We are as aware of Landcare as we can be within our financial capabilities, we try to be as green as possible. Trees are not very expensive but fencing is terribly expensive.*

Some farmers were annoyed because they had spent resources on percipient Landcare measures but those further up their catchment had not and the results of this inaction was flowing down to their property. When respondents who had foregone conservation strategies were interviewed, the conversation usually became stilted and at times defensive. Several suggested that a change in the tax system by providing tax deductions or breaks for land rehabilitation would help, particularly when experts are made available in trouble spots, such as in the case of 'M' in Campion.

'M' *We just wish we could have a 200 per cent tax deduction or something along those lines so that we could spend the money while we have these people here. We are paying an enormous amount of tax rather than spending it on Landcare yet the experts are here to work with us now so the restrictive element is the amount of capital we can put in to it.*

There was also common concern about increasing numbers of weed varieties that are not easily controlled by chemicals. 'M' Campion explained her experiences.

'M' *All farmers have a problem with weeds. Yes they are a problem mainly because of the expense of the chemicals these days needed to control them, and they are getting harder to control. The chemicals are good in the way they enable you to plant the crop, because here the window of opportunity is pretty narrow you have to get the crop in the ground at the right time or otherwise it is not going to happen. So chemicals are good in that way but everybody worries about chemicals because of the health aspect, because you feel that the chemical companies don't really care if it is bad for the whole community. At crop spraying time we must all get a pretty heavy dose of chemicals because there are big areas of crop here and it all gets sprayed two or three times. Money is what makes things go chemicals must sell and the companies tell you what a great job it does at getting rid of the weeds. They do work well, but you are concerned about it because nobody is going to be up front as to what problems there could be. I know places like California there are huge problems with people suffering from chemical poisoning. I also worry about what it is doing to the land long term.*

It has also been documented that chemical fertilisation has brought about soil acidification. 'R' in Campion admitted to over-farming, using tighter rotations and heavy fertiliser applications over a twelve year period. He conceded he is battling some unforeseen problems.

'R' *I increased the use of fertilizer to maintain production out of the land. It is not positive in the long term because you are still draining resources from the land. For example I'm battling with organic carbon deficiency. These are very important to production and are proven to deteriorate under agriculture full stop, and now I'm paying for it. I have a big cropping regime to make ends meet and I've run it down and sooner or later that's going to start infringing on my production.*

Those farmers who have accessed information from the experts and have been able to budget for comprehensive implementation of Landcare strategies are confident their farm income and the land will reap the benefits. 'B' in Campion was very enthusiastic about the future.

'B' *If farmers could see that by putting in trees they were going to benefit in resale value. Somebody is going to want to buy their property, it is going to be worth more. If a farmer can see that they are going to stop half their paddocks going saline then most will do it. For most people it is very much dollar orientated. Landcare is just not trees. It takes into account productivity. But we can't do one without the other. What we say is we have to look after our land because if we don't we can't crop it. So we take some land out of production in terms of alleys and trees*

with the idea that will actually increase production on the land. No wind problems, so therefore production goes up. As long as they are planning, a lot of the Landcare stuff fits in without a hassle but I think getting people to plan is another big hassle. So many want to do this but don't have the disposable income to do it.

It would seem that the majority of farmers clearly understand the advantages of landcare and sustainable farming practices but the key is having the disposable income to actually implement the strategies which are not inexpensive.

3.5 Doing Business on Farms

It is generally accepted that the business of farming is complex requiring knowledge of a broad range of technical, business and practical skills.

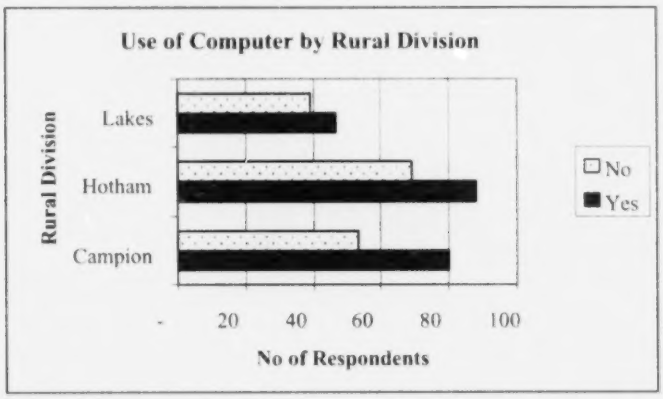
Use of Computers for Management and Farm Business

It was assumed that many farm enterprises would use a computer to assist them in the management of their business. The questionnaire responses showed that only 55% of all the respondents used a computer for the management of the farm business. Table 3.5 shows the percentage of farm enterprises in each statistical division which use a computer and Graph 3.10 illustrates the responses from each statistical division.

Table 3.5 Percentage of Enterprises Using a Computer, by Statistical Division

Use of Computer	Campion	Hotham	Lakes
Yes	68%	55%	45%

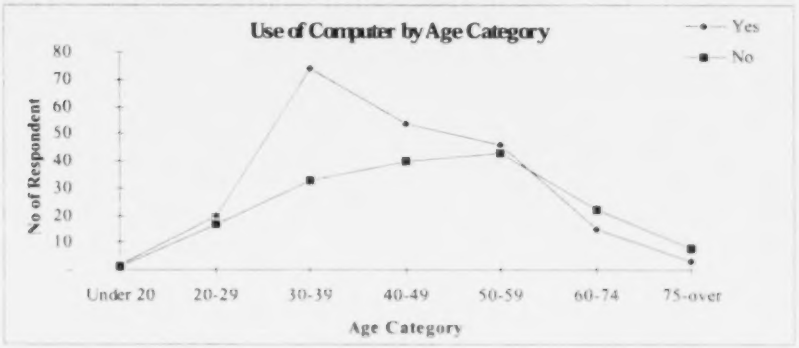
Graph 3.10 Enterprises Using Computers by Statistical Division



When this data is analysed further by the age, formal qualifications and gender of the operators, it shows that most of the computers are usually operated by males in both Campion (57 per cent) and Hotham (53 per cent) but are equally likely to be operated by a

male or female in Lakes. The age distribution of the users of the farm enterprise computer is shown in Graph 3.11.

Graph 3.11 Use of Computer by Age Category



It can be seen that the older the respondent, the less likely his/her enterprise will use a computer for management/business purposes.

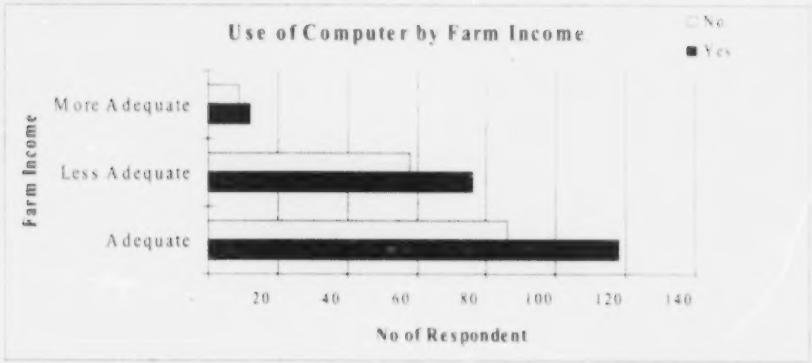
As would be expected, the results showed that in those farm enterprises where there is a tertiary educated partner, there is a greater likelihood of the enterprise using a computer for management and business purposes as shown in table 3.6.

Table 3.6 Formal Qualifications and the Use of a Computer for Business Purposes

Highest Formal Qualifications	% Use of Computers
Tertiary	69%
Certificate/diploma	57%
Trade/TAFE	50%
Completed secondary school	57%
Left school before 16 years of age	48%
No response	2%

There is no denying computers are a potential aid to managing a business, but their presence or the lack of, does not necessarily denote profitability or poor business practice. Nonetheless, the data was analysed to ascertain any relationship between the use of computers and farm enterprise viability. Graph 3.12 compares the number of respondents who use computers with those who do not, while also showing their perceived farm income adequacy over the last ten years.

Graph 3.12 Use of Computer by Farm Income



This graph is not conclusive but does show that there is a greater likelihood that a farm enterprise which uses a computer for farm management and business will have an income that is either adequate or more than adequate.

Business Advisers

Farmers in the Western Australian central Wheatbelt tend to use a range of advisers. Many use accountants and AgricultureWA and some regularly use agronomists, farm consultants and business consultants. Lawyers are used occasionally but usually for the transfer of property or the settlement of a farm succession dispute.

Many farmers have had to get used to the idea that Agriculture WA advice is no longer freely available and the only source of technical information. It would seem that many of the agronomists in the regions are university and Agriculture WA trained but now work for large agri-businesses and generally farmers are happy with their service. Field days continue to be an important source of information and are sponsored by both government and corporate institutions. Some interviewees were concerned that the transition from government sponsored information forums to corporate funded information days is fraught with commercial bias. 'M' in Campion shared her concerns:

'M' *We go to field days. The company in town that sells most of the chemicals to us employ a farm advisor, and he conducts field days. We attend those sorts of things but you always have in the back of your mind that this man is selling chemicals so you listen to him and keep in your mind that this is a commercial enterprise you, treat it with caution. We read a lot, the Department of Agriculture's Journal, leaflets on different topics, the farming magazines which are heavily into advertising in disguise, you have to read them with a skeptical frame of mind.*

A number of farmers use their farm adviser both as a business consultant and a farm adviser, but most realise that a computer program could do much of the work for them for considerably less capital outlay. The difficulty is not knowing who to ask about these issues, and a coyness in admitting a lack of computer knowledge. Most of the farm enterprises interviewed commented that many of their advisers are city based, with occasional visits to the farm. The expectation is that farmers will make time to see their adviser when they go to the city and all other communication will be by telephone or fax. Generally, interviewees accepted 'arms length' consultancies as the norm. During

discussion, many reminisced of government services freely given in times past and regretted the 'user pay' system. Few however could foresee the system reverting and agreed that it probably limits the ability of poorer farmers to obtain the latest farming and management information and technologies, thereby further separating the efficient farmers and the 'belt tighteners'.

3.6 Summary

The ability to generate sufficient income to service the operating costs of the farm enterprise as well as being able to provide a livelihood for the farm family is a priority for farm businesses. The difficulty in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia is the limited ability to diversify into other professions or within the agricultural sector, particularly while the wool market remains weak. As identified by Lloyd and Malcolm, (1997) the nature of the demand farmers face for their output, being both price and income inelastic; and the nature of the supply of agricultural output which increases more rapidly than the demand due to technological change, causes agricultural incomes to rise more slowly than incomes in the non-agricultural sector. There are opportunities for off-farm income but active off-farm income is more likely to be limited to seasonal semi-skilled work and it is often difficult to juggle the on-farm responsibilities with the off-farm work. Many enterprises have expanded their holdings and extended their overdraft in the last ten years and yet for many, their disposable income has not necessarily increased. When extra disposable income is required, often for non-productive purposes, farm enterprises are faced with a number of alternatives and environmentally unsound choices are usually only taken when there appears to be no other option. Nonetheless, they are sometimes taken.

At the same time, while many farm enterprises are struggling to remain viable, there are a number of successful farming industry enterprises identified in this study who demonstrate continual alertness to new opportunities and a commitment to testing old ideas and meeting the challenges of globalised agricultural and financial markets by doing things differently. They show themselves to be innovative and responsive to change. At the same time, despite considerable competition, these businesses were able to succeed using time tested strategies such as attention to detail, provision of service, collaborative work practices and proactivity. Overall as a group, they demonstrated a willingness to experiment, make changes, take some risks, challenge traditional practices and generally encourage 'possibility' thinking. However it is also important to note that this group are also atypical to most farmers: the management structure of the business is simple, husbands and wives are recognised equally as integral resources to the business, the farmers have made an adult decision to be farmers and have had experience in other industries prior to farming and off-farm income is considered a important part of the overall business.

It has been argued (Gow, 1994; National Farmers' Federation, 1993) that government rural adjustment strategies are essential for achieving improvements in productivity and efficiency (Lawrence, 1994). Such policies seem logical (Gow, 1994; Musgrave, 1990), if Australian farmers are to be internationally competitive, but the humanity involved and the potential environmental risks caused by market driven agriculture sometimes appear overlooked and discounted. 'Adjustment' has meant that many farmers and their families have left their industry and usually their communities, thereby putting some communities and services at risk. While improvements in productivity and efficiency will enhance the profitability and viability for some, there are no indicators to guarantee that margins and

returns for broadacre farmers will improve, nor that social stability will be restored (Gray, 1994).

It would seem that while world and more particularly, Australian political and economic policies are driven by economic rationalist principles, the focus is on agricultural efficiency. This is despite the Commonwealth taking a broader approach to regional community development, the aim of which is the creation of "sustainable, competitive and resilient rural industries and communities", (DPIE, 1995, p.18). The question has to be asked then, is how can economic viability be pursued in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia, while at the same time achieving social and environmental sustainability, (see Higgins, 1997). What can be done to encourage more of the atypical farmers cited while at the same time preserving a community in which successful farmers can thrive?

4. Infrastructure and Services

4.1 Services and Income

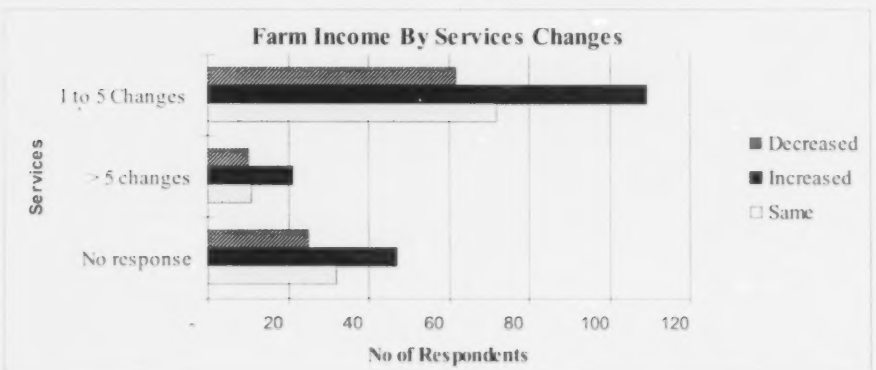
Media reports and other anecdotal evidence has suggested that centralisation and closing of services is impacting on the profitability and efficacy of farm enterprises. The provision of government infrastructure such as railway, postal, health and education services, as well as corporate services such as banking have been referred to as crucial for the survival of a viable rural Australia. (See Tonts:1996; Jones & Tonts:1995; Vanclay & Lawrence:1995; Taylor:1991). A significant proportion of the questionnaire for this study was devoted to assessing the effects of diminishing infrastructure provision, the centralisation of services and/or the closure of services. Accessibility of essential services within an hour is the accepted government standard, however many respondents (37) made particular mention in the 'comments' that an hour's drive is in fact at least two hours unproductive time away from the enterprise. Furthermore, many respondents commented that the unreliability of the services and the lack of choice of service providers were not acceptable. Question 23 of the questionnaire asked if the change in the delivery of certain services had demanded more disposable income, (that is, businesses have to spend more money and time to access them than in the past). Table 4:1 shows the most often cited service changes demanding more disposable income in the ten years, 1987-1997.

Table 4:1 Changed Services Delivery Requiring More Disposable Income 1987-1997

Services	% of respondents
Obstetrics	25%
Senior High School	19%
Full Banking	29%
General Medical	34%
Dental	28%

Graph 4.1 shows the responses to questions about the change in services in relation to farm income. Of all the respondents, 12 per cent claimed they had had a negative change in at least five services in the last ten years.

Graph 4.1 Service Changes in Ten Years by Service Changes



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The results are ambiguous. The survey returns showed that changes to service delivery has limited if any relationship to the general economic viability of the farm businesses responding, however, the on-farm interviews and focus groups conveyed a different message. The data received showed that loss of services did result in higher costs for some farmers, but overall, their farm income increased. It would seem then, that they were able to recoup the costs by pursuing other farm business strategies. Nonetheless, it is well documented that local and town businesses are adversely affected by changes to service delivery (Beal, 1998; Harrison, 1997; Ministry of Fair Trading Report, 1997).

General Medical Concerns

Most interviewees understood that it was difficult to maintain a business for many service providers given the dispersed population and the government micro economic reform, but for others it was a question of equity. 'J' from Lakes felt very angry about the intermittent medical services, the lack of choice and options given regional dwellers compared to urban dwellers.

'J' *Just get this straight. Out here we earn a hard buck but we are good for Australia. I mean, our crops are pretty useful for the Australian export dollar. But hey, we are human too, we get sick sometimes and we need a quack (doctor), no, we deserve better than a quack. I don't like some of the people that get shoved out here, I want a choice just like you fat cats in the city. If I want to pick and choose who my family goes to, I have got to go to Perth, four hours away. I know the argument is that a doctor does swing by here every other week, but listen, I can't be guaranteed to get sick on that day.*

The 'K' family in Lakes explained the inconvenience of living on a farm, straddled between several basic health services.

'HK' *When 'M' (baby) needed some antibiotics and the Corrigin guy (doctor) didn't have them, we drove to Narrogin to get the script filled. So, we went 50km to see the doctor, and 150 km to get a script filled and 100 kms home, all in a day with a three week old sick baby.*

A young mother 'C' from Campion 100 kilometers from the nearest specialist's clinic at Northam commented,

'C' *We've got what the nursing staff call the 'flying circus' which is surgeon teams that come round ... once every 2 or 3 months but with anything else (medical complaints) you've got to go out of town.*

The statistics from the questionnaire indicated that even though medical services were not always convenient, they were available. While most respondents reported that general health services were within an hour's drive, this does not capture the very real difficulty many communities experience in attracting and keeping a resident doctor. The lack of more sophisticated support facilities and the relatively small numbers of potential patients are both factors that discourage doctors from establishing or taking over a rural medical practice. Premature or sick babies or children are regularly transferred from smaller hospitals to larger ones far away to received specialised treatment. While a mother usually

accompanies her baby, she is separated from her family, perhaps other children, her support networks and the experience can be both expensive and traumatic. Obstetric services are not generally available outside the larger towns such as Perth. Merredin (Campion) has a well equipped hospital but it has not been able to maintain anaesthetist services so obstetric services ceased 15 months ago. Obstetric services was a service marked as 'needed' by 21 per cent of all respondents, who were not limited to a specific gender or age group. (The statistical division with most respondents was Campion, 33% of all respondents). When asked about having babies, Mr and Mrs. 'B' from Lakes explained, that Mrs. 'B' had had the option of going to hospitals at least two hours away, Narrogin or Perth) or taking the risk and having the baby locally, without an anaethetist present, which is not permitted by the health and government authorities.

Mrs. 'B' *You are not allowed to stay local, even when I had the last baby I was supposed to go to Perth but I didn't want to go to Perth because I didn't have anyone to stop with and the doctor said "we'll see", and I was fine. It would have been awful being apart from everyone, plus everything else.*

Several interviewees spoke of the inconvenience and cost of having to go to Perth to have their babies, particularly when there are other children that must be cared for. The cost for a family staying in Perth is high. Not only is accommodation and travel expensive, but being away from the business for several days at a time is inefficient, inconvenient and potentially costly if other labour has to be employed or essential tasks are left undone. Community nurses often fill a void in professional health care. They inevitably work long hours, travel long distances and take responsibility for a huge variety of cases.

Mental Health and Related Issues

Mental health services stood out for the frequency it was marked as 'needed'. Overall, 19 per cent of all respondents perceived that there was a need for a service and it was evenly spread across all three statistical divisions. It is well known that young males in particular, living in rural and remote areas have a significantly higher rate of suicide than those in urban areas. The Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services Youth Suicide Monograph (1997:3) acknowledges that there are major variations among rural communities with small, remote and inland communities at highest risk.

During the interview process for this project, one community was still coming to terms with a recent male youth suicide, seven months after another male had committed suicide in a neighbouring community. These events were mentioned over and over again, from many perspectives, in communities far from the grieving community, regardless of whether the interviewee actually knew the families closely involved or not. Many questionnaires were returned that had some mention of suicide or mental illness, even though comments about this were not specifically elicited. An interviewee, 'D' in Lakes showed his concern.

I/viewer *You mentioned here at the bottom (of your questionnaire) about suicide, is suicide prevalent here?*

'D' *You aren't supposed to hear about it but it is happening in country areas and people we know have done it, it is quite huge. It is a huge problem.*

Another couple, 'J' and 'T' in Campion expressed similar views.

'T' *Friends that ... perhaps there might be a need. At the moment I think times are so hard.*

I/Viewer *Is there a regular incidence of suicide in this district.*

'J' *No, there was one two and a half years ago, but in a sixty mile radius there probably would have been four, which was terrible.*

'T' *They were all men.*

Few knew which agencies to contact should there be a hint of a problem, many wanted to know how to deal with grieving friends and family while a few others admitted they had at one time or another felt suicidal. The effect on the immediate community suffering was profound. 'M' at Lakes described her anguish.

'M' *... my brother committed suicide nearly two years ago and until then you could have asked me this question and I would have said who needs mental health, but it hit me well and truly. He lived in the country town and there was no one who could help him and he had, I guess chronic severe depression which had not been recognized by any of his family. So then I went looking for mental health services and didn't come across anyone in Western Australia, and because I didn't know where to look. I am an intelligent educated person but mental health unit, I didn't associate it with mental health, I wanted suicide support. Also, at that time you are under stress so it is harder to find the support anyway ..... I have proactively tried to get more mental health (services) out here and I wrote to the Minister of Primary Industry about it, because we had no support at the local level. Basically I believe if you want a good community you have to provide for their personal health as well as their physical needs.*

Now, the incident that happened here last year. ...There were 500 people in this community who were in pain, they had no where to go, no one to look to. One minister came out from Kondinin, the other two were away at some conference or something and this (suicide) happened on a Thursday, so it takes until at least the end of Friday for people to realize they need help. It wasn't until the following Monday that anyone out here got any support and that was just one offer of support from the central family counselor and from the minister of the Uniting Church. ...Anyhow a gentleman came out from Mental Health in Narrogin and just met with me and my husband a month later after the Ministers' office had contacted him but the community had had no contact from Narrogin. They had not been informed of this suicide that had happened out here and the dreadful problems it had caused. So there is a real (communication) breakdown....

I feel you need to have someone with professional social skills and counseling, family counseling skills. We had a family counselor for three years in the mid eighties and he fulfilled a great need in this district but he arranged for the next person to take over his job to live more central to the region. He was trying to service a region that covers about 160km. OK, it might be better for them to do

their job, but a community like this one that goes for another 80km east is left starving, there is just no mental support at all.

The local Telecentre has taken this on board just because we care about our community. We applied for Healthways funding and we have a woman coming for a whole week, the last week of March, to talk about issues like raising boys, mental health issues, raising self esteem in your child and if this works well we may try and do it once a year. But again I am really disappointed that we as a community have had to get up and do that, find the money. It is a lot of organizing and to have someone in your community who is there when the crisis happens is just what we have to have.

Several interviewees admitted they had suffered depression of varying degrees, although it would appear that not all these were clinically verified. When asked if that had interfered with the enterprise, all agreed that it had affected the farm business. In two cases, it had caused the family to break up and for at least some of the family to move away. Another interviewee admitted having recent suicidal tendencies. Access to professional help was more than an hour away but the family were encouraging that person to continue counselling, even though it was disruptive and a day away from the business each time.

It is important to note here, that suicide and general mental health issues were not highlighted in the questionnaire, and yet many questionnaire returns (28 per cent) made mention of one or both issues. Furthermore, during the interview process, interviewees, with no exceptions, talked freely about these issues and how they have either impacted their lives directly, or that of their community. The focus groups also devoted much discussion to the subject and were keen to support church and government strategies to address some of the identified problems. Several participants were also local government representatives and they indicated a concern that perhaps their shires were the only ones with a problem. All, without exception wanted more information and resources to stem the tide.

There are stories both press and anecdotal, that due to a harsh, unseasonal frost in the last week of September 1998, which caused widespread crop devastation, there were a number of suicides in the Central Wheatbelt. Interestingly, the sources were vague when pressed for details and the State Health Department had no record of any of these recent events occurring. In response to my querying these reports with the State Health Department, the following response was provided in November, 1998.

I have heard of this concern recently and have looked into suicide in the Albany, Northam and Narrogin areas and have found that suicides there are really on a par with other years. Further, all areas deny any suicides due to farmers and economic downturn (frost included). There seem to be rumours abounding in rural areas at the moment perhaps brought on by media mis-representation (or vice versa). What does seem to be the case is a sense of hopelessness and feelings of depression abounding in rural areas. This hearsay may well be that people are talking about these feelings which may include discussion on suicide and these discussions are being picked up on by others.

The frost has hit a large section of the Central Wheatbelt, all of Lakes, the southern half of Campion and the eastern half of Hotham. The frost is all the more devastating in the current

economic environment because sheep and wool offer limited financial respite. The talk of suicide, whether it is real or not, reflects a general frustration and fear of debt, demise and continued hardship now and in the immediate future.

4.2 Marriage Guidance and Legal Aid

The questionnaire returns indicated that both marriage guidance and legal aid services were perceived as 'unavailable and needed' by a consistent percentage of respondents across all three statistical divisions as shown in Table 4.2. More respondents from Campion took the opportunity to write about the issue of marriage guidance in the 'comments'.

Table 4.2 Need for Marriage Guidance and Legal Aid Services

Service Needed	Lakes, Hotham & Campion
Marriage Guidance Services	16%
Legal Aid Services Needed	14.5%

There was also a small but consistent (11 per cent) 'needed' response to 'women's refuge'. When these topics were broached during the interviews, respondents were not particularly willing to discuss the issues. Most alluded to hearsay or spoke of third party experiences. Many of these conversations centred around farm inheritance and farm succession issues and how those situations precipitated a need for marriage guidance, legal aid and sometimes, women's refuge services.

Interviewees acknowledged that the provision of these services in regional areas is troublesome. Even in towns where there is a doctor, there is no choice for residents and living in a small community with your doctor or councilor can present some awkward social situations. Those wishing to access the services often do not wish to discuss personal and intimate details with people that live in their community but at the same time, the problems often require long term counselling and a professional relationship with the same counsellor needs to be established. 'K' in Campion typified the responses to the issues.

'K' *I am aware of domestic problems and abuse violence and both those people have used the counsellor in (town), often with reservations because they are so close [the communities are small and everyone knows everyone]. Some people won't go to the counsellor in (town) because they have a farm and they know people and they are worried about confidentiality which is fair enough. One person was reasonably happy with them and the other person said no, they were not at all happy with the help. The counsellor didn't pick that (physical abuse) up as being a problem so I can see why she (woman with problems) didn't see it (the service provided) as being suitable, but if you don't let the counsellor know what the problem is it is hard to address it.*

Interviewer *Do you think, sometimes, abuse doesn't have to be physical does it?*

'K' *Agreed.*

I/viewer *Do you think the medical people at (town) and the counsellor would be aware of those sorts of abuses that aren't so obvious?*

'K' *The counsellor at (town), I sort of view her as a colleague, so when I want to go to a counsellor it gets a bit hard but I have used her as a counsellor on certain things. She seems to be fairly aware but everyone out here gets stretched so thin that I don't know how much time they have to think about things. I think it would be easy when people don't want to admit those sort of things to try and cover up and not come out and say or admit to sensitive stuff. To me it can be so subtle that sort of thing that sometimes people don't realize it themselves what the problem is.*

I/viewer *Do you think those sorts of issues in a community such as this can affect people staying in a community? If there is an issue between daughters-in-law and the parents-in-law or between husband and wife or those sorts of scenarios are you aware of a number of families breaking up and people moving away from the community?*

'K' *Yes for sure.*

Many of these problems, as mentioned, focus on farm family relationships and business. The social implications of these topics is addressed later in this report.

4.3 Aged Care

The questionnaire did not reveal any great need for further aged care services. The interviews however gave many the opportunity to emphasise how important the availability of aged care is to a small community. Keeping older people in the community helps maintain medical services in the district as well as retaining other community services such as the post office and local shops. It is many of the older citizens who volunteer their time for such services as the local library and the CWA, providing refreshments at social gatherings and other services. A number of interviewees commented that draining the community of older people leaves a community bereft of an important social dimension. Many older people would like to stay in their community, as explained by 'M' at Beacon in Campion.

I/viewer *Tell me what HACC is?*

'M' *Home and community care, it is the service that the government provides to help people stay in their own home rather than go into an aged care facility and the Shire administers it out here through the (town) Hospital. They work together. Fortunately there are only one old couple and they have a large enough family living close. They don't need help, we can help them with whatever they need, but if there were more old people here who needed support it would be possible to get some services to them. Nothing what you could get in a big town of course. The situation is better than it probably has been in the past. In the past what has happened is that when people have reached the retiring age they have gone. That's bad for the community, especially the shops and of course it's good for the kids in town to have a sense of heritage.*

Generally, most participants in the research project were keen to maintain whatever aged care services there were in the local community. It was easier for the next generation to visit and care for older family and it also facilitated the transition from active farmer to retiree. Other interviewees emphasised the quality of life advantages of retiring to their local town with little, if any crime and a close knit community network to lookout for them.

4.4 Education

Respondents regardless of age, statistical division and gender, were concerned about the availability of childcare and education, although the statistics gathered in this research project did not reflect the anecdotal concerns about the lack of availability. The interviews revealed that education services for some are available now, but there is the constant threat that it will not always be, as was communicated by 'J' at Tincurrin in Hotham.

'J' *There are now about 20 children in the school and within two to three years there will be 13 and I would say the school will probably close then. There is probably us and the M's (neighbours) who have three families who have all got children. I know even now that some people would say that the school is too small. There just aren't many children in each class so they don't have many friends or they can't choose friends, and I know some people say they would be better off going to a bigger school now but the distances they would have to travel are horrendous.*

Interviewer *Where would they have to go?*

'J' *They would go to Dumbleyung or Wickepin which are both 50 kms away which I imagine on the bus would take well over an hour to an hour and half. I know someone down here who is probably only thirty or forty kilometers from Dumbelyung and it takes their daughter, who is six years old, up to an hour and twenty five minutes to get to school on the bus.*

Interviewer *What are the other options?*

'J' *Perth for a few years at least. That's another family lost to the community.*

The data from the returned questionnaires showed that most respondents were 'quite' satisfied with the availability of pre-school and education services to junior high school levels. The availability of further education after junior high school level (senior high school and TAFE) had impacted upon the disposable income of 19 per cent of all respondents. (Refer to Table 4:1). The interviews enabled the issues to be discussed at some length. Those respondents (22 per cent) who indicated in the questionnaire that they had at least one child living away for education purposes were of particular interest. Not all of those 22 per cent had indicated in question 21, (which addressed the availability and need of services), that they perceived a need for higher education facilities. In fact for some, the services were available if they wished to access them, but the lack of choice and quality as well as having to travel for at least an hour twice a day was deemed unacceptable for some parents such as 'H' in Campion.

'H' *Our choices were to leave them at Kellerberrin until year 10. If we chose to do that they would then have to go somewhere else for year 11 and 12. That would be either hostel accommodation at Merredin, or daily by road to Merredin which would mean an hour every morning going up and an hour coming back and we thought in year 11 and 12 that was two hours that was time consuming and wasted time. They wouldn't live in Merredin and nor would they live with us, they would just be in limbo. They weren't part of one community. We felt that the subjects that our children might need to do would have to be done by telematics and we thought that if they were doing hard subjects like chemistry and physics, which the eldest girl did do, telematics wasn't the answer. I wouldn't say that we were unhappy with the Merredin Hostel but we certainly weren't happy with what the Merredin School could provide our children. So then the next thing was to decide, well, where would they go and then when would they go?*

Some families do not have the facilities available and have limited choice.

Really because we don't have those extra teachers coming in, it really effects the town. Nearly all the farming families can actually afford to send their kids away to private schools but just the normal town population, those kids will travel on a bus to Katanning. It is a round-about route and it is actually about one and half hours on the bus there as well as back which I would never consider. If you want them to do any good you are wasting your time. If they had a straight route over there it would probably only be three quarters of an hour. (It's a) huge impact because you lose the teachers, the kids are leaving now when they are twelve. How many will come back? My first son, I sent away in year 8, and I sent him to a private school. My second one, I kept him here for first year high school then I sent him to Narrogin for second year. He did two years at the high school and two years at the Ag school. I regret very much that I didn't send him to a private school, I think it would have done him good. Our daughter stayed for years eight and nine and has just gone to St Mary's in year ten. So when the high school closes they have to go away when they are twelve years old. No farming families would catch that bus because the buses that come from the outside areas wouldn't meet with the other bus in time, unless you left home at crack of..... The school closing will have a big effect.

Most interviewees seemed to think that most farmers could afford to board their children if they so wished. 'S' in Campion typified the general opinion.

'S' *Those younger ones, generally farmers who have teenage children that are university age, generally go to Perth to study at university and get jobs elsewhere. I would think very few get a job in the agricultural sector. Generally they tend to go elsewhere, engineering, science which is quite popular now. Very few of them would come back on the farm. Whereas for the town people it is different. I have noticed in Kellerberrin that the farming sector tends to be a lot more aware of the education needs of their children, certainly a lot more committed in giving their children a good education. That might just be the fact that, some of the town population, I might be wrong here, it is just my perceptions, the town people, they are often working class, for want of a better word, they probably aren't that interested in getting a good education for their children, whereas farmers tend to send their children to Perth to private schools or are prepared to bus them to Merredin to better funded schools.*

There were some farming families however who were struggling to budget for their children's education, such as the 'H' family in Hotham. The expectation was that if the children were to be educated privately, the wife would have to fund it with off-farm income.

Mrs. 'H' I want them to finish high school, I want them to go to boarding school and finish year 12 and then make up their mind what they want to do and see it through, I don't want them to come home straight away.

Interviewer Do you foresee if they go to boarding school that the demands on your off farm income will increase?

Mrs. 'H' Yes, (husband) has already said that the only way he can see that (our children) will go to boarding school is if I take on the whole of the fees.

Interviewer Does he mean you leave the farm and go to live in Perth to do that?

Mrs. 'H' No, I refuse to do that, that is not an option for me. I would prefer to keep the family together and have (children) go to Narrogin High school than break the family up, it is not an option. No I will just get more work, I can sell work, and if I don't make enough work then that is it, the farm has to fund the rest, I am not going to kill myself to do it.

For some families, off-farm work for education purposes while living on the farm has either not been viable or has not been the preferred choice. Four families were interviewed who have made major changes to the way they live their lives and/or farm their enterprise in order that the educational needs and expectations be met. Two of the families decided that the wife and children would temporarily leave the farm and rent accomodation in Perth in order that the children be educated privately. The wives and children of these families commute to the farm on week-ends and holidays. They continue to identify the farm and its community as 'home'. Neither of these farming operations changed markedly.

However, two other families bought houses in Perth and changed the way they farmed considerably, for the sake of their children's education. The husbands of both these families commute to the city and the wives and children visit the farm only on school holidays or during particularly busy farm times. 'S' from Lakes recounted how the family came to make their decision.

'S' We weren't getting the feedback from teachers that we required. Of the teachers that were there, hardly any of them wanted to be there. (Town) was seen as a place you only stay at until you get somewhere else. They felt they have to do the obligatory 3 or 4 years of country service, get it over and done with. And at (town) school there are all multiple classes where you might have 3 years in the one classroom and that type of thing. I did not want mediocre education for my children.

Both farm enterprises are now entirely devoted to cropping. All stock has been sold. This facilitates being able to leave the enterprise for extended periods and minimises maintenance on fences and water sources. 'C' from Lakes explained that they view their living arrangements as no different to an oil rig worker, with week long shifts.

'C' I go back for every school holidays, we go back on some weekends.... when (husband) is cropping. Normally he comes up here. When he is not busy he is here for a lot of time. From January to March he is here a lot, so it is not like we don't see him for weeks on end. In fact last year there wasn't a period of more than two weeks that we were apart and that was only once, so while he is seeding we will go down each weekend.

All four families initially expected that eventually, at least the husband and wife would return permanently to the farm and farm community. One of the latter couples however, believes that the farm and the living arrangement is more efficient now and they will continue farming the land but living in an urban community.

I/viewer In terms of your business, do you think that this arrangement of commuting has enhanced it?

'G' It has certainly streamlined it. I guess it has improved (because of the new arrangement). We certainly do things differently now than we did before. The farm runs a lot more efficiently than it did. We work more efficiently. Well yes I guess we work more efficiently and the farm figures show that it runs more efficiently although it is offset by the fact that it costs a lot more to live down here. We do not regret it. Our family and our marriage has benefited.

'S' I am continuing on as I am now. Once the children leave school, husband and I would still like to live here in Perth and do what we are doing now.

This couple did admit that they were fortunate they had the flexibility and wherewithal to respond to their children's education needs in the manner that they have. They also conceded that rural infrastructure will continue to withdraw if more families follow their example.

I/viewer In terms of your situation, being full time farmers but also living part of the time in the city or away from the farm, what do you see is the future of the community of farming regions, as farms take over other farms and efficient farms move in on less efficient farms?

'S' Well ultimately I guess it is doomed but it seems efficiency and efficiency-to-scale seem to be more important. You can take that right back, say 50 years where there were probably 10 times the population and its a terrible shame that that still isn't the case. Its a vicious circle and a round about, because I can see that infrastructure will continue to disappear. In small country towns like ours, the people aren't there so they can't choose to duck into the local shop because it is not there any more, so you cannot be self sufficient in country communities any more. It's a shame I don't know how it can be stopped.

It appeared that the local school means more to a small community than simply a place to educate children. It is a meeting place and central focus for the energy of the community. When a school closes, quite often the rest of the town dies with it. 'J' in Hotham recounted her husband's experience.

'J' *In (husband's) schooling life there was a school a Harrismith, that closed and the children all came up here to our school. There isn't much left there now. The pub closed soon after and everyone went elsewhere to shop, wherever their kids were.*

In summary, education is very important to the people living in the Western Australian central wheatbelt. It would also appear that attaining an education at tertiary and sometimes secondary level is the time when the next generation leave the community, sometimes permanently. Many parents feel their family unit is broken up prematurely as written in one survey from Campion,

> *"if children need to go to Perth for work and education, family ties are broken, it is difficult to keep the family together".*

However, as population and services dwindle, parents have demonstrated that they are willing to change their life style, live separately, leave their community and/or commute long distances for their children to get the education they deem suitable. In some cases, those people are lost to the regional community forever, thereby contributing to the regional population decline.

4.5 Childcare

Women were noticeably more concerned with the lack of, or threat of withdrawal of, childcare services in both the surveys and the interviews than were men. Men appeared to become more concerned when services could only be accessed by disposable income expenditure. During discussions, it became evident women had thought about the long term costs associated with mixing children and some farming jobs. Unlike their wives, male farmers were often not particularly concerned that their young children were frequently left in an empty house while the adults worked on the farm or that children were in close proximity to sometimes highly dangerous farm activities. 'S' in Hotham reasoned,

'S' *I think childcare is really important. I certainly like it for a bit of 'time out' but it is really important when I am helping do farm activities. I have tried to explain to my husband that me sitting by a hospital bed in Perth for a couple of weeks if there is an accident with one of the kids, is going to cost this business a whole lot more than thirty bucks in childcare, not to mention the waste in time and guilt.*

4.6 Banking and Business Services

Similar arguments have been raised when banks announce they are withdrawing from a community. Comments made by respondents on the questionnaire and during interviews support the findings of the Regional Financial Services Taskforce (1997). Closure of a bank branch causes inconvenience for many and usually shifts commerce away from the local community because people will shop and conduct their business wherever they bank. 'B's comments were typical of the many with regard to bank closures.

'B' No banks, means no cash! So I go to the biggest town and while there, I shop to save another trip off the farm.

With rationalisation, postal, banking, telecommunications and government agricultural advisory services have been centralised, often in the same larger urban regional centre. This has often been to the detriment of the smaller towns which have worked hard to scrape back some of their lost resources, vibrancy and popularity. It has been estimated that the closure of a full-time bank service takes approximately $500 000 from each shire in the first year because customers take their other business to the centre with a bank. (Regional Financial Services Taskforce: 1997). Bank clients whose local bank has closed and have chosen to take their business to a remaining bank, resent the government charges (e.g. Financial Institutions Duty) associated with opening and closing accounts.

Bank closures have had wide business and community ramifications. Having access to cash for residents and businesses is often a problem but a growing concern is the requirement to carry substantial amounts of cash and the lack of safe storage. Banks and government have tried to encourage electronic banking but in most of the central wheatbelt there is only limited access if any, to the internet, and a general aversion of electronic banking. The promise of better business through internet and e-commerce is falling short of promises made by politicians and banks for many farmers in the Central Wheatbelt. 'H' in Campion has been involved in several community 'think tanks' in an endeavour to secure a banking service to the town.

I viewer Telecommunications, have you investigated how they might help the banking situation? What are your phone lines like here?

'H' They do not support internet. You can't do out of town electronic banking, but they have told us they are updating them. There is a woman that has tried electronic banking and in the end even the bank just gave up and said the lines weren't good enough. They are supposed to work on the exchange this month, but they have been telling us that for 12 months. The internet service is very poor.

Many have attempted to offset dwindling service infrastructure through electronic business, the transmission levels of existing phone services often means users are not able to access the same level of operational ease as their metropolitan counterparts. There are frustrating time delays and occasional operational failures. Mr A. in Campion has geared his farming business operation around computer facilities, because the local infrastructure has been pared to the minimum and also because the industry continually advises that farmers must change and be proactive. Mr A.'s experiences with telecommunications have left him wary of 'working smarter'.

'A' Last summer we lost our phone lines for a week, which meant we had to travel into Merredin for all our banking and business. We lost our fax facilities and Internet capabilities. Consequently our on-line banking, access to commodity prices as well as daily Bureau of Meterology information was lost, and we had no idea when it was going to be restored. We spent so much time and money finding out when the service would be restored. We are trying to run a viable, sustainable business and like smart businesses in Perth, we need access to reliable telecommunications, especially if we don't have the other services that other businesses take for granted in the capital city.

Local businesses also face additional pressure in the form of expectations to provide an Eftpos facility. Operating this facility takes time and resources away from their core business, and requires substantial cash reserves, making that business potentially vulnerable to robbery. 'N' at Hotham summed up a general sense of dejection with regard to rural financial services.

'N' *No bank at Wickepin so you go to Narrogin. When you do some shopping in there at the same time, there is less trade in Wickepin, its the beginning of the end. The shop offers EFTPOS but he sometimes runs out of money too.*

'K' in Hotham was more explicit.

Interviewer What does not having a bank in town mean?

'K' *Same old story, people go out of town to bank so they shop out of town so that effects the town. I keep a lot of cash in the house. Every now and then I think about this and get scared because I am involved in everything around town. We have a gymkhana here, (and) you take $10,000 on the day and you have all that cash in your house or car for a couple of days, before you head off to Narrogin or Lake Grace to do the banking. I don't think the people around here hone in on that sort of thing, but we are sitting ducks for some highway robbery. It is the ones that are doing the services like treasurers that I can see the big problem and also deposits. You might get a cheque for $1500, I might not get to the bank for three weeks. I probably keep a lot more cash than I used to. Not having a bank, it is an inconvenience, not as much for me but for the old people who don't have a vehicle they are the ones who feel it the most.*

Some shire offices such as Williams and Nungarin are trying to fill the gap by acting as agencies or offering safe deposit facilities, but it does not really assist local business. The banks argue that much of the everyday banking can be handled by EFTPOS, mail or electronic banking via the internet, and that all small communities, both rural and urban, must accept change. However, appropriate infrastructure must be in place to enable this to happen. It would appear that people in the Western Australian central Wheatbelt are having difficulty coping with change that has greater social impact than the loss of a service.

In some communities the postal services are also being downgraded, further exacerbating banking by mail, if that is offered as an option. 'M' and her extended family in Campion have experienced the frustrations of service reductions or closures.

'M' *The banks just closed and that takes a whole family out. It's a worry as to whether we will keep a school teacher. Well in the last few years, the post office has downgraded to a community mail agency and so that only opens for a few hours in the morning. The banks closed so the local shire council has taken on the banking facility, but it is not a full banking service, it is just limited. The local co-op is restricted now to only cash transactions and that makes things difficult. We don't have a bank so if you are running out of money you really have to plan because you can't just pop in and pick up somebody's shopping for them. Say I might go and pick up Mum's shopping. Well now she has to give me a cheque - a real pain in the neck, and you feel you can't be*

bothered half the time. More customers now go to Merredin due to banking and hence you will buy stores in there, so the co-op is going to get less and less (business). The range of goods they offer is reduced, things keep just going down and down all the time.

'C' in Campion commented that she often felt frustrated by the down sizing of services and the inherent bureaucracy accompanying centralisation.

'C' *The politicians, by taking all the government departments away are making it difficult for us as a business to survive and for our community to stay alive. One time, fifteen years ago we had a Telecom crew up here with five or six men, we had an SEC crew of up to 8 or 10 and their families, we have none of that now. We had a Water Authority crew they had about 20 men and they all had families and children. We have about 2 on the water crew, one or two on the Western Power crew and one Telecom guy, and every time your telephone breaks down you have to wait for someone from Merredin to come and fix it. Now they are talking about taking them from Merredin back to Northam, so you could be without your telephone for two or three days. With any of these things, you leave a message, they ring back and I'm out working, they leave a message, and so the bloody cycle continues. Sometimes I ring up these services and you talk to Darwin or somewhere and when you say you are from Moorine Rock, they say "where"?. That makes me feel real important I can tell you.*

Several interviewees mentioned that, although banks are encouraging their customers to be more computer oriented and less manager dependent, some bank staff can not cope with the new regime either. 'P' lives 50 minutes from Southern Cross in Campion and has spent time and money becoming familiar with electronic banking but is frustrated by banking staff who are not computer competent or confident.

'P' *If we want to change anything on the computer we can just do it all there and get a print out, but the bank bloke, he is not happy with this so I have to go all the way back and change stuff in his office and sign. He just doesn't understand the new way.*

The Regional Financial Services Taskforce (1997) identified a number of strategies and alternatives to traditional banking services but they usually depend upon adequate telecommunications and/or postal services which a proportion of the questionnaire respondents were not confident could be guaranteed in their community in the long term. A co-ordinated approach between banks, postal services, local authorities and businesses would go a long way towards securing a satisfactory service and stem the business drain away from small communities.

4.7 Telecommunications

Over and above the role of telecommunications in operating a business, it is also a very important instrument in combating a sense of isolation which is particularly critical for women and the aged in rural and remote areas. The questionnaire results indicated that the main form of communication was by telephone and fax. Very few respondents used email

whether it was available on their property or through a local telecentre. It would seem from the data generated by the questionnaire that most respondents were happy with their telecommunications services with only a total of 5 per cent of respondents indicating that a more comprehensive service was required. The interviews and focus groups revealed however that this was not necessarily the case.

Most farm enterprises now have two lines to their property, enabling fax and telephone lines to be separated. Many explained that this was not always so because the local exchange had a limited number of available lines. It is only as community population has decreased that lines have been made available. Businesses that want another line for modem/internet purposes often still have to wait for a line to become available. The 'S' family in Campion described their situation.

I/viewer Do you have problems with Telstra generally? Can you have as many lines as you want?

Mrs. 'A' No we are limited here because the exchange is nearly full.

I/viewer Does that present a problem for you?

Mr 'A' It could do (in the future). I don't know how we will get on to the internet. I don't know if that's a separate line, to be honest I am not aware of that.

Mrs. 'A' At the moment that is not a problem for us because we have a fax line and a phone line but if one of the boys were to get married and put another house up the road we might have trouble getting another line then.

'D' at Corrigin (Lakes) complained of the same problems.

I/viewer Just back to Telstra, do you know if your telephone lines are actually capable of taking the internet.

'D'. No, that was our problem. When they (Telstra technicians) were investigating, it was going to be a problem. I don't know if we can get it out here or not, it all got too hard. We have two lines now, one for the fax and one for the phone. Even to do that with the number of lines coming out of town they had to put a splitter over here at our neighbors because there wasn't enough lines coming out of town to get to here. I don't know if we could have it out here, with our fax line and with our telephone line I don't think we could have the internet.

It would appear however that customer need for the internet is limited. 'F' in Hotham acknowledged that internet service was available but their enterprise has not pursued access because there has not been the business requirement.

'F' Telstra has a pretty good set up and it is just a matter of logging on for us. I think once a few more of the rural services, ie AgWA and WAFF and as soon as the business aspect like Wesfarmers and Elders use it, we will jump on to it pretty quick.

Another business issue repeatedly mentioned was the limited local range. Most business phone calls for a farm enterprise are charged at STD rates. 'C' from Hotham noted this expense.

'C' *Services – Telecom – most calls are STD and our phone bill is HUGE because of this. Also this would make Internet use very expensive. We've not done anything about "the net" as yet, due to costs.*

Several interviewees noted that this was in stark contrast to business people either in the city or close to it. Many also felt this was contrary to the Australian Telecommunications Act that infers equity in accessibility to a telephone service for all Australians regardless of their location.

The northern half of Campion has had ongoing telecommunications service difficulties and limited access to telephones. This was made public in November 1997 when a Beacon (Campion) fire officer's telephone was out of order for ten days despite repeated calls for service. In that time a large bush fire broke out and he had to rely on relayed messages and two way radio. Another reported incident occurred after the last bank closed its doors and a local bank offered to take on a 'super agency'. A data line was put in place but remained unconnected for six weeks, forcing residents to drive more than 80km to the nearest bank. 'J' in Campion described similar frustrations, but she is particularly concerned about possible safety risks for members of her family.

'J' *Since they did the upgrade of the exchange we have had more numbers available to us. One of the reasons why we couldn't get any more phones was because they had run out of numbers, you had to wait for someone to die or leave town. When son and daughter-in-law shifted into their Homes West house, the line wasn't connected and the line had to be put in. They were one of the couples that were told in August that you had to wait until February for a connection. Daughter-in-law got on to Hendy Cowan (local Member of Parliament and Deputy Premier) and told him and she got back to Telstra and said it was not satisfactory. She told them "I have a young child, I'm pregnant and my husband is allergic to bees, I have to have a phone", and they said "are you the lady that contacted Hendy Cowan"? She said "yes", and they said they could probably be there in a couple of weeks. That was early November. She is with a phone now, it was hooked up at about the middle of November. If you want action for this stuff you have to pull some pretty big strings.*

It would appear that telecommunications services are interrupted throughout the Central Wheatbelt from time to time. Regional clients become frustrated and angry when it takes several weeks to repair services. Communication with the outside world is halted, including Telstra, which makes the scenario all the more irritating because it is difficult to know when services and therefore business by telecommunications can recommence.

During both face to face interviews and the focus group discussions, the sale of Telstra was discussed. Many were keen to buy shares when Telstra was floated on the stock exchange but they were equally worried that regional telecommunications services could be compromised. The Federal government seems determined to introduce competition in the provision of telecommunications services because of the belief that significant gains are to be made in efficiency. They were concerned that should Telstra be wholly sold off by the

government, services will be both curtailed and costed to reflect the distances and remoteness of customers in rural locations. If efficiency and the cessation of cross subsidies are the goals of government, the distances to be covered for so few customers is likely to place affordable telecommunications services in jeopardy in most regions of Western Australia. Many complain that service is patchy now, so it is unlikely to improve. 'S' in Lakes was particularly concerned.

'S' *If Telstra does go private we are going to get reduced services in the bush. The government promise this, that and the other, but as soon as it is in private hands it is out of the governments hand and it really is that simple. We can't get a mobile phone service out here, and in my book we actually need it more than the city areas.... If you are up the back paddock and it is 10 or 15 kms away from home and you need to order a part, well it would be really nice if you could just order that part from where you are. Instead you have to stop what you are doing and go home to use the phone. Stupid isn't it?*

A number of respondents and interviewees explained how a mobile telephone network service would greatly enhance efficiency of large farm enterprises but most agreed it is unlikely that new services will be introduced, given that numbers of users is limited to a small group. 'P' in Campion, also demonstrated how, as his holdings became bigger to achieve economies of scale, a mobile telephone service would be invaluable, rather than depending upon UHF radio contact with the homestead and tying up someone to receive messages. 'P' also expressed his frustration at the general lack of understanding of rural business shown by Telstra and other rural service providers.

'P' *I'll tell you the worst one, Telecom. They are shocking. In December, for me to make a phone call sometimes I will have to travel up to 12 or 15kms.*

I/viewer *Why can't you have a phone at the shed?*

'P' *I have just put one in at the shed, but still I have property 7kms further on from the shed, I still have to come 7kms to there.*

I/viewer *You need a mobile phone?*

'P' *Yes. You ring someone up and you can rarely get someone at their desk, and the people in the office say "I will get them to ring you back", and I can honestly tell you this, one person in 23 years has rung back from Telecom. So you sit around waiting for half an hour, which is wasted time, and you ring back and they say, "I was about to ring you". I organized Telecom to put a phone in the shed and that was on 9 December. Also, we can't speak with the blokes in Merredin, we have to ring Perth because now its all centralised, its shocking. On the Monday, the Merredin (Telstra) guys are coming out, but I rang them the day before to make sure they are still coming. Well they never showed up did they and they never bothered to let me know. And the joke is they are in the communications business. I lost a whole day in our busiest time waiting for them to show up.*

Why can't we have a mobile unit? They have one in Merredin that services 10km, fat lot of help that is. Why do people walking down the street with a phone box at

the next corner need a mobile service? We need a mobile service! Telecom's response is, "all I can say is keep ringing back every month, in the end they will have a service up the highway, but if you are more than 10kms off the highway, (and we are 20 kms), you won't get it" It is all based on population. It is half a million dollars to put up a tower and the more people that use it will get it. That is what economic rationalism means to me. The bottom line is, the income we generate for Australia out here is a lot more than a lot of other places that have mobile units - it is a joke, and then you come in home and watch a little bit of TV and you see their (Telstra) ads and down the bottom they have got (the slogan), "we are making it easy for you". I see red every time I think about it.

Many interviewees felt disadvantaged when comparing their business services to those of a town or city business. Reliability of telecommunications services was highly valued by the interviewees.

4.8 Freight: Roads versus Railways

For two decades the government has been rationalising rail services. Taylor (1991) addressed many of the rural and regional social and economic issues associated with rail closures, and these are still current. It is generally acknowledged by farmers that the inefficiencies of the railways are without question and that road freight is more convenient and economic. The key issue that concerns most respondents is the cost of maintaining the roads, particularly in the summer when large trucks are carrying big tonnages on narrow roads. The maintenance costs are carried by the local shires and ultimately the rate payers. As the population diminishes, the increased road maintenance costs are shared among a dwindling number of rate payers, where in times past when there was a railway service, many of those costs were borne by the government. In order to contain the costs, shortcuts are sometimes taken with fatal results as highlighted by 'M' from Lakes.

'M' *The road maintenance we have problems with. We've had a girl killed on the road, we've had so many accidents along this strip of road, and there was one our son was involved in and that was on the road that had just been graded. (The road) was like ball bearings, no signs (warning of) slippery gravel. Signs for cross roads have just recently gone up but we had a girl killed there on 15 December, two Christmases ago and it took them 12 months to put signs up there to say there was a cross road to slow down. The grader, he goes up and down the road, and puts out no signs. It's hopelessly dangerous, you come around the corner and almost smash into the dinosaur chugging along*

Furthermore, some interviewees considered large trucks on small country roads to be a safety hazard for other users and children waiting for school buses.

'S' *I think user pays is fine as long as provider reaps. I nearly get cleaned up on the road going in to town, because this is a main road. If someone is coming the other way you are going to get two wheels in the dirt every time or you have a prang. If you are coming round the corner and the big heavy grain trucks don't stick to their side of the road, you are in the bush Too bad if that happens while kids are waiting for the bus, they're history.*

Railway closures have however made farm and business deliveries more efficient. Items are often delivered door to door and attractive rates can be negotiated if goods can be backloaded. 'B' in Lakes uses some rail facilities but sends stock way by road and on the return journey has all the fertiliser and chemicals delivered.

4.9 Summary

The provision of government infrastructure and services generally in the Central Wheatbelt is complex. The de-population trend in this region has made it uneconomic to continue a presence in the region and so many services have been withdrawn or centralised. A number of towns in the central wheatbelt have even offered free land to entice newcomers and thereby boost shire numbers to keep services. Few of these strategies have worked in the long term. Tont's (1996:32) research shows that local development initiatives and opportunities for value-adding in the wheatbelt are limited and tend to be very localised. Tonts warns that the success of local development strategies is often at the expense of neighbouring towns so there is no real regional gain.

General health services are a concern but it would seem that the participants in this study are prepared to live with the current service provided it is not pared further. Of concern is mental health which was a recurring issue in the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups despite no explicit questions having been asked. A few were prepared to speak of their own experiences but most were concerned about how the various expressions of mental illness were impacting upon their families and communities. Suicide in particular was viewed as a real threat because it affected how people viewed themselves, their community and even their industry. Many participants indicated that mental health issues encompassed unresolved family issues and sustained stress and was having a direct impact on the economic viability of some enterprises. Most felt help was necessary but few could suggest how that might be delivered or addressed.

An equitable and cost-effective mobile telecommunications service was identified as necessary for the continued efficiency of the sector. A more up-to-date service could also offer some solutions for those communities which have lost traditional banking services. A co-ordinated approach between banks, postal services, local authorities and businesses would go a long way towards securing a satisfactory service and stem the business drain away from small communities. There is a general sense of inequity when compared to urban dwellers, who are invariably the policymakers rationalising the services. This sense of inferiority feeds negativity and the cycle continues.

Education is the outstanding infrastructure issue that actually mobilises families. Parents in the Central Wheatbelt are, in general, determined that their children will be given a broad educational experience. If they deem that not to be available nearby, there is a high likelihood that they will move themselves or send their children away so that a suitable education can be accessed. Such decisions have a significant impact upon the enterprise and the community. It would seem then, that the availability of infrastructure or the lack of it, can influence business decisions and the viability of communities in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia.

5. Social and Community Issues

The interrelatedness of changes in global markets and government policy with cultural change and the family farmer in the Western Australian central Wheatbelt becomes obvious after listening to family farm commentaries of what happened when, in response to a particular macro decision or event. This is of course not a new relationship but what is different is that farming communities are now pared to a minimum so that once large towns and shires are having difficulty sustaining themselves. As farms become bigger and more capital intensive and profits marginal, less farmers and their families can afford to devote as much time to the community as they have in the past. The net effect is the diminution of a sense of community and perhaps even the community itself. As governments withdraw services, the onus is on communities to do the work, and business enterprises either offer labour or capital to sustain the communities. It was decided that an attractive feature of rural life is a sense of community which also has the potential to enhance the environment and the satisfaction of individuals within that environment. Furthermore, the reasons for which many of the Central Wheatbelt towns were established are no longer relevant. (Many towns follow the railway line and were a specific distance from each other, enabling trains to replenish water and coal. Furthermore, early twentieth century Western Australian governments adhered to a policy that required all agricultural land be within a fifteen mile access to a rail service (Tonts, 1997, p.5)). Now, the locations of some towns no longer necessarily reflect optimum efficiency. Nonetheless, the communities that have grown around the towns feel a strong sense of place and identity and resist the diminution of their town. The questionnaire addressed some of these issues and the opportunity for written comments suggested that concerns for the community and social infrastructure of the Central Wheatbelt were significant for many respondents. Subsequent discussions in focus groups and around farm kitchen tables were long, passionate and complex. This chapter will examine the pervasive social changes that are occurring in the three statistical divisions of Hotham, Lakes and Campion in the central Wheatbelt of Western Australia and the interrelatedness between the economic outcomes of the changes and their impact upon the social fabric of rural society in this region.

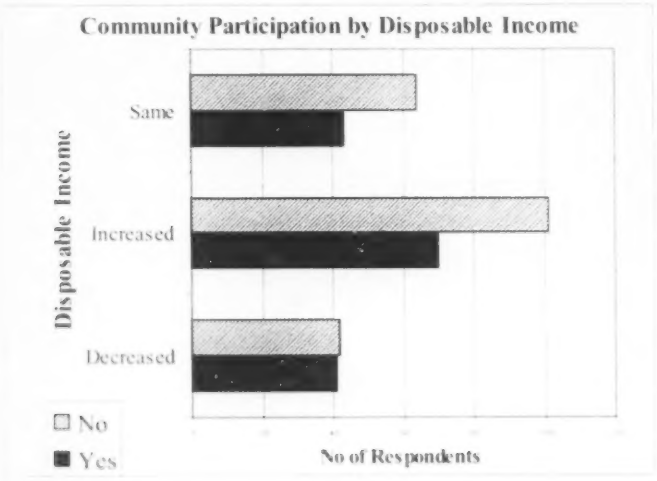
As explained earlier, the three statistical divisions being studied for this project have been experiencing persistent overall de-population since the 1961 census. There is the possibility that the trend is cumulative and self-perpetuating as identified by McKenzie (1994) and becomes self-sustaining as it leads to service diminution and subsequently more outmigration. A large number of participants in this research project have increased the acreage of their farm enterprises in order to achieve economies of scale and sufficient return on investment. Many of those same farmers expressed regret and concern about the dwindling rural population and the shriveling of a sense of community. With a little prompting many conceded that a farm enterprise 'buying out' another farm enterprise translates to less children in the school, less teachers in the community, less customers for the local community and so the cycle continues. This supports Lawrence and Williams (Lawrence & Williams, 1990, p.40) claim that ' a more productive agriculture is coming to mean less "productive and viable" rural communities'. Most respondents and interviewees were loathe to overtly describe their town as 'dying' but it was obvious that many felt their

town was struggling to remain viable. The question has to be asked, "does it really matter"? This chapter will discuss the question.

5.1 Does a Sense of Community Matter?

Maintenance of the sense of community has subsequently fallen to civic minded citizens who are prepared to give their time and energy to the community. This question was posed at the focus group discussions and everyone agreed that if a sense of community was discounted then society would degenerate to an "amoral anarchy". Nonetheless, community involvement comes at a cost to individuals, families and businesses. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that as margins narrow for some farm enterprises farmers and their families spend less time contributing to their community and being actively involved in sporting teams, service organisations and recreational clubs. The question was asked in the survey whether active participation in community and social groups was influenced by the financial health of the enterprise. Graph 5.1 shows the results.

Graph 5.1 Community Participation by Disposable Income



The results indicate that for those respondents whose disposable income has increased or remained the same, their participation in community and social groups is more likely to be influenced by the financial health of their enterprise. However, of those respondents whose disposable income had decreased in the last ten years, about the same numbers reported that they were influenced by the financial health of their enterprise, as were not, to participate in community and social activities. Focus groups in particular discussed the relationship between enterprise disposable income and generally it was agreed that many would forego some business requirements in order that family members continue to participate in some community and social activities. The question was asked by one focus group;

Is farming a means to an end and shouldn't that end be a certain quality of life?

The town of Pingelly had a particularly heightened sense of community due to a devastating fire that swept through the shire just prior to Christmas 1997, killing livestock, burning ready-to-be harvested crops and causing several fatalities. The Pingelly focus groups acknowledged the economic devastation but calculated the potential psychological damage had there not been a local fire brigade, hospital, shops and services that co-ordinated rescues, provided shelter to friends and facilitated counseling services. Many participants felt the community had rallied to rehabilitate farms and people with no strings attached and the healing process had bound people together, as well as enabling the next productive season to proceed.

The local agricultural show, which traditionally brought the community together for a social outing as well as an opportunity to showcase products, produce and ideas has been a victim in smaller communities. This is probably due to a number of reasons including changing tastes in entertainment and a more mobile population, making access to sophisticated entertainment and knowledge more accessible. Nonetheless, the focus groups in particular discussed the role of such events in rural communities, and they are still valued by many. Towns such as Narrogin which had an annual two day agricultural and community show for decades, now has a one day show. Organising events such as this devolves more and more to individuals, as service clubs fold, struggling to maintain membership. Diminishing service clubs is not just a rural problem, it is a worldwide phenomenon, but it has a significant impact on small rural communities struggling to maintain a sense of community. The costs (labour, time, telephone, hire of goods etc) associated with running such an event are sometimes hard to recoup and for some towns, a show is a thing of the past.

The historical reasons for the location of towns was discussed at the focus groups and the question was posed whether those reasons were now redundant and given that our population is so much more mobile, should it be accepted that some towns be allowed to die? This caused a great deal of emotive discussion but was decided that the three large regional centres were a long distance from many farm enterprises and time travelled to access services located there, was time away from productive work on the enterprise and therefore a significant cost. A counter argument offered was that as governments withdraw services, the onus is on communities to do the work, and enterprises either offer labour or capital to sustain the communities. It was decided that an attractive feature of rural life is a sense of community which also has the potential to enhance the environment and the satisfaction of individuals within that environment. Focus groups mentioned the importance of keeping older people in the community and unless there are services to help maintain them, they will drift away to other centres. Older citizens are valued for their voluntary contributions around the district and their business.

Maintaining the younger generation was seen by some as a very important goal for local communities. If events and occasional entertainment are provided for younger people in the district it is hoped that they will be encouraged to stay. Few communities in this study had been able to provide facilities for youth entertainment. This will be explored in some detail later in this chapter.

Community activities are an avenue for entering the community and for establishing friendships and social support which sustain individuals when services are not available. A regularly cited example was childcare and social nourishment, particularly for women.

I don't have family here and I need childcare from time to time. That sense of community is important because I know people who can help me out with the kids or just being my friend. You need a town as a focus.

Childcare services can also influence community activities in a town as 'K' in Lakes explained.

'K' *We (the town) have a crèche once a week, on Tuesdays, so every thing is organized on Tuesdays. It can be really hard if you are trying to organize something and they are trying to utilize the crèche. You can have four or five things happening on Tuesday which is bad because you don't get a lot of support for any of them. It also affects the businesses in town, because everyone comes in on one day, so all the groceries and vegies have to be here by Monday or they just sit on the shelf and wilt.*

5.2 Women and Rural Communities

The following quote from a focus group discussion highlights the importance of community for newcomers, particularly women.

If there had not been a community here when I married I think I would have walked away. People who have lived here all their lives don't understand. For a young newly married girl, it is all new: a new husband, a new house, a new family who probably own the house, a new industry, a new culture. If I had not been able to go to the local town, how else would I have recognised myself as me?

It is difficult to attach a value to such a comment although it was made clear that newcomers are important and women have an increasingly active role in all rural businesses. It is now being recognised how important women are to the agricultural industries. *The Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of Women in Agriculture* Report (Elix & Lambert, 1998) calculated that women, based upon conservative data, constitute 32 per cent of agricultural workers and make up a major client group for agencies and organisations which serve the agricultural sector. It has also been documented that women have skills and priorities, which are identical and complementary to the skills, brought to the sector by men. As men have withdrawn from the agricultural sector women have taken on an increasingly broad range of farm activities and they increasingly fill the requirement for flexible farm labour in response to the highly variable climatic and economic circumstances on farms. *The National Farmer's Federation* study (Kilpatrick, 1996) showed that greater use of labour saving technologies have enabled women to do previously extremely strenuous tasks and greater emphasis on keeping good financial records and farm management planning has also allowed women to employ a greater range of skills on-farm.

Many farm women however, are unpaid for the work they do, or as one woman joked, "the unpaid employed". ABS statistics[1] show that the number of 'Employers', 'Own account workers' and 'Employees' have all dropped dramatically in the last 10 years however the accounted contribution of family labour has increased significantly. These statistics do not

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey (unpublished data) cited in **National Farmers' Federation Discussion Paper,** Vol 9, November 1995.

separate the agricultural industry workers whose salaries are accounted for on paper but are rarely tangible. Many women who belong to a multi-generation farm enterprise complain they rarely see the income attributed to them for business purposes. 'L' at Lakes felt that she, like many other daughters-in-law were always seen as a threat, even after twelve years of marriage, and by discounting her tangible contribution it minimised any bargaining power she might have for personal expenditure.

I/viewer *What work do you do on the farm?*

'L' *Quite a lot now the kids are in school. I drive tractors and trucks when required, do a lot of the sheep work, I'm a good sheep dog and last year I did a couple of kilometres of fencing with a young work experience kid, so I do my bit.*

I/viewer *Are you paid?*

'L' *Well, no, not formally. My husband gets a wage from the family partnership but it's the same as when I was housebound with babies. That's how it works for most young marrieds.*

I/viewer *How do you feel about that?*

'L' *Don't start me. I don't bring it up any more because it makes life tough for husband with his parents, and they are my kid's grandparents. But put it this way, because I just 'help out' and don't have a say, I can't put in my two bobs worth for my new bathroom or those other things which would make living here really nice. A bathroom doesn't earn its keep on a farm so its not a priority.*

The Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of Women in Agriculture Report (Elix & Lambert, 1998) also identified that women are increasingly contributing to farm enterprises through their off-farm earnings, from 24 per cent to 68 per cent of farm cash income since 1984. This off-farm income is critical to the ongoing viability of some farm enterprises as well as meeting family needs.

The Farm Weekly Rural Women's Survey (Haslam McKenzie, 1997) conducted throughout Western Australia in 1997 had returns from approximately one thousand respondents. The survey asked for women's perception of the single biggest problem for rural women. The overwhelming response (63 per cent) was 'isolation'. Many respondents qualified this statement by explaining their sense of isolation. It was not necessarily physical isolation but also, psychological, emotional and cultural isolation. Many women interviewed for this project identified with the problem of isolation. The actual cost of this was discussed. 'L' at Bruce Rock in Campion explained what isolation meant to her and their family business.

'L' *I felt I didn't know any one, and that everyone was checking me out. I was lonely. I spent a lot of time on the 'phone and then I started going to Perth more and more, even when I was needed here at seeding time. My husband and his family couldn't understand it and then were furious when they had to employ someone. Their anger just made it all worse. It improved a lot when I started playing tennis in town and went to craft.*

5.3 Housing and Casual Labour

Throughout the data collection process, the lack of available housing and casual labour were persistently mentioned as infrastructure issues that consistently interfered with the efficiency of rural enterprises. This seems ambiguous when the other persistent trends cited are dwindling rural populations and declining sense of community. On further reflection, it is difficult to know which comes first. In some towns there were up to five year waiting lists for rental accomodation and throughout these three statistical divisions, rents are expensive and the accomodation not fancy. In some towns, housing is at the town limits and beyond those, home builders incur expensive service (such as water, sewage and power), establishment costs that are difficult to recoup either through resale or rents. Beer (1998), has identified similar ambiguities elsewhere in regional, non-metropolitan Australia. The problems are exacerbated because housing needs often reflect seasonal activities, so that demand and supply for housing fluctuate. 'S' from Hotham explained,

'S' *Oh Christ, the housing is a problem, we need to fix it to get people in. We (the shire) have an old house, 70 years old, only two rooms, and we house a man (employee) there. It is hot in summer time, freezing cold in winter, one room you can't swing your cat there properly because you will hit the walls, it is unsatisfactory. Wickepin Motors was after a couple of mechanics and can't get people up there because the standard of housing is so low, with no heating or air-conditioning. The best thing the shire has done was to put up the two bedroom units by the railway line and it was snaffled up by all the young singles. (The Shire) need another four of those at least and then you could get that pool of labor all the time and then it attracts more people, especially young people. Yep, housing is a big problem.*

A number of the interviewees were also shire councillors and were familiar with the problems. 'B' in Lakes confirmed the claims.

'B' *One of the problems is the quality of the housing. Homeswest used to build houses in country towns - now it doesn't happen any more. As a council, we have a meeting tomorrow, and a special part of the meeting is set aside to look at improving our council housing. We find that if you get someone up from Perth to be grader driver his wife looks at the little old Homeswest home and says bugger this I am not moving here. Maybe we (the shire) are a bit at fault. We haven't addressed it for a while because a lot of our employees requested years ago to buy our houses off us which was good to a certain extent because it relieved the council of any maintenance on these old houses but it has a sting in its tail because if these guys find another job they keep the house. We've got to replace them and the house. Young singles are another problem. There is not really any decent accommodation for them, but we are in the process of rectifying that.*

A number of interviewees mentioned that some wealthier local residents invest in real estate in Perth and yet there are some good real estate investments to be made locally, probably with a more secure rental market and yet the mindset is that 'the bush is no good for investment'. Some felt these issues could be promoted through the local shires. The focus groups also agreed with this view, and felt that the regions need to appreciate their own investment and business opportunities.

Casual labour, particularly experienced labour is difficult to attract in many districts. Many sons of farmers are not employed full-time in the farm enterprise and are able to earn a living locally year round. However they are usually employed on the family farm during the seasonal busy times. Casual labour from the city are not attracted to work, often because of the negative media coverage given rural areas, some of which is promoted by people in the regions themselves trying to attract government recognition of the complex issues associated with rural living. 'P' at Campion referred to such an experience.

> *'P' The biggest thing here is getting people to work this far out. Generally you will find, and it happens to everyone, people get as far as Merredin and they just turn around and drive back and then ring up and say sorry I can't expect my family to live out here, it's too far and too flat. Where can we go when we finish work"?*

5.4 Rural Dwellers Devaluing Themselves

During the interviews and focus groups, there were occasions when the participants noticeably devalued themselves or their environment. Admittedly there were many participants who were finding it difficult to sustain their enterprise and even their communities but there were others who admitted to being financially secure and happy to live where they live. Nonetheless, they tended to focus on the negative aspects of their industry and forgot to appreciate their locality until they were actually asked to list the advantages. Their reaction was often quite defensive.

There were also a number of businesses and farm enterprises that were very successful, creating a niche market or securing a niche through percipient market research or service. Several of these were interviewed while others were visited because of their reputation. Two of these businesses did not want to be cited for fear of the 'tall poppy' syndrome. One said,

> *You can make a good living here, it is like the city, you have to provide service and understand your market. Certainly there are frustrations associated with doing business in the bush, but hey, you get frustrations in all business. I don't want you going round making my business to be something great though because people around here don't like show-offs. That will kill my business.*

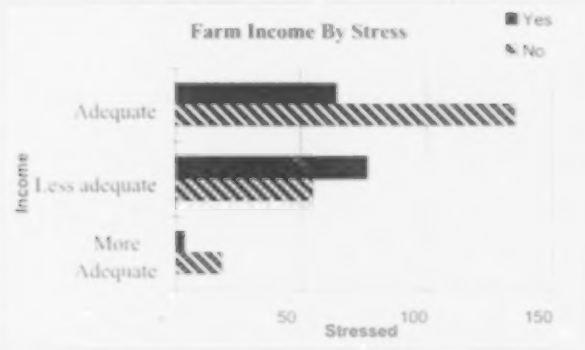
Invariably, participants felt sorry for city dwellers and felt living in the regions to be a better quality of life, even though there were challenges such as the weather and international prices over which they had no control.

5.5 Stress

Gray and Lawrence (1996, p174) identified that stress can be attributed to many aspects of farm family life, but that research on stress on family farms is limited, and that a predictive model which might be useful to social and health workers has not yet been developed. Nonetheless, it would seem from this study and others (Bryant, 1992; Duncan, Volk and Lewis, 1988; Rosenblatt and Keller, 1983) that economic vulnerability induced by threatened business viability can contribute to stress on farms, which subsequently translates to social stresses. The questionnaire asked whether the respondent's relationship

with their family was affected by the financial health of the enterprise. Graph 5.1 shows the results.

Graph 5.1 Stress by Farm Income



It would be expected that as farm income becomes less adequate stress levels increase. Perhaps less expected are the numbers who claim their farm income is adequate but their stress levels have increased. From the interviews, it would seem that farming is requires a variety of complex technical, practical and business skills and it is a challenge and therefore potentially stressful, to compete with and conquer the variable climate, world markets, government and social needs.

Following the question, was the opportunity to write comments about this question. 7% of the returns did not respond to this question. 38 per cent of all respondents claimed that the financial health of their enterprise affected their family relationships. The 'H' family in Campion eventually capitulated to the stress and has sold up their farm and plan to leave the district, even though none of them have lived anywhere else and they are fearful of the future.

Mrs 'H' We are concerned about farming. We have good years and bad years. Recently we've had some just average years and we are 'browned off' with the stress incurred. We felt that we'd rather get out while we can, before we get to the stage where we are told to get out..... Its totally stressing my husband out, its the unknown. He's the Shire President and he's given up that, which he likes. We don't know what will happen to us all. I feel sorry for my son, he had no other expectations but farming and now its all gone.

Of the 55 per cent (220) who responded negatively, 17 respondents wrote in the comments that they suffered stress but it was not necessarily caused by the financial status of their business. This was borne out in the interviews and focus groups. 'J' at Campion admitted that he was a successful farmer with a large enterprise and a more than adequate income but he frequently suffered from stress.

'J' Yes I have stresses. I think I get grumpy more than anything and that's from being tired but I don't actually have money pressure that I know other people do. The thing that I find difficult is not a financial stress, but balancing the job, the family and the

social. That's the bit I find difficult: making sure there is enough for all and generally its the social then the family that are the two that miss out the most.

In three questionnaire returns, it was the pressure associated with combining community work, farm work and the domestic responsibilities. Two others wrote of the difficulties that their families were experiencing looking after unwell family members and eleven wrote of the stress associated with farm succession and extended family relationships. From the on-farm interviews, the farm succession issue showed itself to be a poisoned challis, which few families seem able to escape, and it would appear to have broad ramifications for communities and even industries.

Farm Succession

The Farm Weekly Rural Women's Survey (Haslam McKenzie, 1997) conducted in 1997 showed that only 14 per cent of the farms surveyed had a firm succession plan in place outlining when it would occur, by whom, what the remuneration for the participants would be and how it would occur. Of the 68 on-farm interviews conducted for this research project, 51 had been through a traumatic farm succession, and 36 admitted the process had been extremely expensive. A respondent from Hotham wrote,

For last 12 years we have tried to split a family farm between 2 brothers. The liquidator and his lawyer have been useless and we have lost a lot of money over this and we are (still) not yet independent and none of us are happy. It is very sad.

Of the 51, 14 families had not had a family reconciliation. Not one interviewee could think of, or remember a family enterprise where there were multiple married family partners who were all happy with the business arrangements, equity and future plans. Those who have endured the process and whose relationships and enterprise have survived such as 'M' in Lakes are sought after by community groups and individuals to share their experiences and insights to successfully achieving outcomes for all participants.

'M' *Look it is an issue that is tearing country WA apart. The need for farm and succession planning. People come to us now and say "how did you do it"? They saw us all going through the pain. Our family went to a farm succession seminar in early 1990, husband's parents came reluctantly. When we got someone into help us they sat at the table and wouldn't say a word. It was hard because they wouldn't acknowledge the need for succession planning*

During discussions, it was explained that while the succession was being worked out, co-operation and farming efficiency was compromised 'I' from Campion explained a not uncommon scenario.

'I' *Oh God it was awful, and the farm really suffered. We were spending money on lawyers and accountants which meant we didn't plant trees, attend field days when we should have, we held off on the fencing program and I think we are still paying for that in erosion and inefficient paddock sizes. I think both families felt the other was gossiping so I stopped shopping in town and that set off a whole lot of bad feeling in the community. In the end, the farm borrowed money at a rate that wasn't sensible, to buy us all out from each other, but we all just wanted to be separate, almost at any cost. Its ghastly.*

Sometimes the farm does not survive the succession process and the costs are enormous. The usual scenario is that the farm is broken up and sold, (usually to neighbours) and the family often breaks down irrevocably. The community often loses a family or families, the school is smaller and may lose a teacher or other resources and local businesses have lost more custom. So the cycle continues.

All of those interviewees who had experienced family farm succession, whether it was happy or not, claimed that they as individual family proprietors of the farm were more successful as sole proprietors. Alarmingly, of those farmers who have experienced a messy, traumatic and expensive farm succession, only 48 per cent even had a cursory plan for the future. Furthermore, *The Farm Weekly Rural Women's Survey* (Haslam McKenzie:1997) showed that of the 57 per cent of the female respondents who claimed they were joint partners in the agricultural enterprise, only 37 per cent said they had contributed or had knowledge of the farm succession plan. A similar picture could be drawn from the on-farm interviews for this project. This has serious implications. *The Farm Weekly Rural Women's Survey* and the more recent RIRDC survey show that farm women are likely to be better formally qualified than their spouse and they are more likely to handle the accounting and business management of the farm. From a business point of view, to exclude a partner in the business from the planning of that business could have serious management and legal problems in the future. *The Missed Opportunities: Harnessing the Potential of women in Agriculture Report* (1998) warned that ignoring the value of women's contribution to the agricultural sector was at the risk of jeopardising the sector's competitive future.

The farm succession issue most often reaches crisis point when a new spouse enters the family. The farmers interviewed for this project were wary of new wives although almost all the interviewees were emphatic that it would be difficult to farm without a wife. Many farms are able to support one family, but when a second family establishes itself, new land is often sought. The RIRDC survey showed that 44 per cent of all respondents had increased their acreage in the last decade, for a variety of reasons. Some enterprises had increased their holdings to take advantage of economies of scale. Others had bought land in order to support the next generation. Since 1994 farming land in the central wheatbelt has been at a premium. Farm enterprises often have to borrow huge sums of money to finance such a purchase. The RIRDC survey showed that 46 per cent of respondents had increased their overdraft in the last 10 years. This can be extremely stressful because of the variability of the seasons and rainfall. Furthermore, Australian farmers are selling their produce in de-regulated markets with few government subsidies and the cash surpluses are not able to adequately service a debt. Declining real prices received by farmers are compounded by rising real costs of production. Even though interest rates are attractive, some farm businesses have succumbed to the pressures.

5.6 The Next Generation

Some interviewees (29) were concerned that, as communities grew smaller, there were few opportunities for their sons to meet prospective wives locally, as 'S' in Lakes commented,

I reckon if they meet a wife it is absolutely good luck.

Consequently, many young rural dwellers travel long distances for a social life. Most young, single farmers are relatively mobile and tend to gravitate to the larger centres or the metropolitan area. This caused another set of problems. Can the business afford to fund the

costs of travel, the accommodation and the time away from the enterprise? 'N' from Hotham expressed some of the concerns.

I/viewer *Where would your son be likely to find a partner?*

'N' *Probably under some prickle bushes. He is taking a girl out who works locally. That's good, not so much petrol, wear and tear on vehicles, time spent travelling, wife worrying if he'll get back in one piece. I worry he might never come back, he might find a waged job down there (Perth). I think most boys round here seem to jag the school teachers or the shire assistants, otherwise they're down to Perth every second weekend.*

Those towns closest to Perth (i.e. within 200kms) are struggling to field football and cricket teams, which traditionally have been a source of community social focus. Relative proximity to Perth appeared to influence community involvement, particularly, for younger people. Apart from the three regional centres (Narrogin, Wagin and Merredin) which each had a population of more than 500, there were limited social resources for any age group. Most towns had a hotel and children also congregated at these, even though, legally they are not able to imbibe in alcohol. Sport was the only other option that most towns had to offer as a community activity. Many parents felt there was little for their daughters in particular, to do in rural communities once they were teenagers. 'J' at Campion typified the focus group and interviewee responses.

'J' *The (pastimes for) 15 - 18 year olds are a problem. Here they just go to the hotel, they can't drink but they just go there because there is nowhere else. In the summer there is a swimming pool and the tennis club. In the winter it's the football club. There is a good social life that revolves around sport but again there is the bar and the drinking scene. The young people don't drink at the hotel or the footy club, because they are just not allowed to. I do know that they do drink on the farms and I don't know if that is such a problem as long as it is controlled, but there isn't anywhere in particular for them to go.*

Even though many parents wanted their children to stay in the district and even take over the farm enterprise eventually, many realised that farm enterprises are not able to sustain more than one family easily, unless more land can be bought and made to produce more than the cost of holding it or the first generation can ease into retirement and still sustain themselves. These issues are real dilemmas for many of the participants in this research project which cannot be solved easily. It seems that planning for such outcomes has to start along time ahead of the event.

5.7 The ABC

The ABC was repeatedly cited as a really important tool for a sense of community throughout all three statistical divisions. All but one interviewee (98.5%) listened to the ABC almost exclusively. Most farmers felt a great sense of 'keeping in touch' with each other and the world through the radio. The 'E' family in Lakes were emphatic about the importance of the ABC to their quality of life.

I/viewer Is the ABC important to you?

Mr 'E' Is the Pope a catholic? You bet it is, that is all we listen to and watch. The ABC radio is especially important to us. The Country Hour and all the weather and prices. No government would dare take the ABC away from the bush.

Mrs 'E' The ABC is important to us for so many reasons. Its company, information, those people are our friends. I wonder if they know that.

5.8 Summary

Research (Tonts & Jones, 1996) shows that economic strategies are less likely to have success if social and community needs are ignored. While agricultural and economic restructuring have been called for, it would seem that in the central wheatbelt there have been some painful social costs which impact negatively on large and small enterprises. Even profitable farms and businesses are experiencing social issues that undermine the efficacy and economic returns of the enterprise.

It is increasingly being acknowledged (Teather, 1996) (Teather & Franklin, 1994) (Poiner, 1979) (Liepins, 1996) (Alston, 1995b) that that the contribution to the agricultural sector by women has not been sufficiently recognised. The data and information collected from this study indicates that women bear the brunt when social services in rural communities are reduced. Isolation and limited support for women are consistent reasons for them wanting to leave a rural situation. It has been admitted by all participants that rural regions and the agricultural industries can ill afford a drain of women. Similarly, the youth drain is a real concern for the continuing viability of whatever community services are there now, in the future. Regions, which are losing population or employment because of a perceived lack of good business opportunities, lose capital and potential entrepreneurs and therefore vibrancy and optimism, continuing the cycle of pessimism and devaluation.

As outlined by Tonts (1996), until the 1970s, Australian State and Federal governments were committed to developing the agricultural economy, its socio-economic viability and anticipating its human needs. Since the 1970s however, government policies have shifted. The Australian society generally has reflected an international trend favouring liberalism, which in part has precipitated government policy based upon goals of economic efficiency, self-regulation and less state interference with market mechanisms. As a consequence, international politics, market trends and technological change can have immediate influence on Australian enterprises, communities and industries, and there are now limited State or Commonwealth government instruments to that could immunise rural communities from the pressures of change, even if it were considered desirable.

Local initiatives and strategic economic development are also shaped by State and/or Commonwealth government policies (Hubley, 1997) that do not necessarily understand or recognise the spatial and locational development of rural social and regional development, nor the differences between regions. Many in the Central Wheatbelt region of Western Australia are concerned about the *balance* of government policy concerning economic, social and environmental issues and the perceived lack of understanding of regional concerns. The increasing pressure on rural communities to meet their own needs requires voluntary labour and time be given by citizens who therefore compromise their own enterprise. There are consistent complaints that businesses can no longer afford that benevolence, and consequently the sense of community is threatened.

As the process of globalisation increasingly exposes regions to a wide range of new pressures for change that threaten their sustainability, a refocusing on a sense of community and place may in fact restore some of the creative human aspects associated with sustainability and consequently, the socio-economic fabric to which an economic value can be attributed.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Farming and primary industry production have been key industries in the European history of Australia and it can be argued, were pivotal in shaping Australian nationhood. Until the mid-1950s, agriculture contributed 85 to 90 percent of the country's export earnings (Alston, 1995b) which has now declined to about 30 per cent. The economic importance is not the only contribution of the farming sector. Rural Australia and 'the bush' have also been central to the invention of the national identity. The image of 'the bush' had a certain romance that the suburban reality did not engender, so although Australia has always been highly urbanised, the rural idol has been a persistent influence for all Australians. It is therefore alarming to document the considerable depopulation trend, the tenuous economic situation of many farmers and the stultification of some communities in the Western Australian Central Wheatbelt statistical divisions of Hotham, Campion and Lakes. It is however important not to fall into the trap identified by Sher and Sher of picturing "the countryside and its inhabitants in nostalgic terms, (and as a consequence), failing to see them as vital communities, as key contributors to the national economy, and as people and places with a significant role to play in creating Australia's future" (Sher & Sher, 1994, p.6).

This research project has investigated whether declining rural community infrastructure has had an impact on the social, environmental and economic well-being in this region. It is an important question given that this region has limited economic diversity and still contributes a significant proportion of the State's broadacre agricultural produce. In economic terms the question being asked is whether there are internal as well as external economic effects of services reductions. It would appear that there are substantial "externalities", that is, flow on effects from rural service provision that may warrant some form of subsidisation if communities are to remain viable and the agricultural sector in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia is to continue in a similar manner as in the past.

6.1 Does community infrastructure impact upon the economic wellbeing of the Central Wheatbelt?

The structural changes in Australian agriculture have had a direct impact upon Central Wheabelt towns because their purpose and reasons for being has largely been tied to servicing the agricultural industry. This dependence has meant a continual threat of unsustainability and therefore closure while National and State governments have pursued budget policies that have seen services withdrawn or centralised. As service provision changes, the local population inevitably access services in the larger centres, and usually take their custom for other goods and services with them to the larger centres to save time and sometimes money. Should the local goods and service provider close then the community is without the convenience and local accessibility. As a consequence, longer distances are travelled, there is more time away from the enterprise, increased wear and tear on vehicles and roads and the community is less able to attract newcomers and potential labour sources. As identified by Tonts (Tonts, 1996b) economic restructuring has eroded the economic, human and social capital required to make self-determination possible and local strategies viable.

Addressing the critical infrastructure needs and how their provision effects the economic viability of the region, this study has shown that mental health, banking services and education are the three issues that actually mobilise people. In other words, those three had the potential to change the way respondents earn a living, respondents' priorities, where they live and their relationship with the community.

Health Services

Respondents indicated that general health services are available, albeit sometimes at some inconvenience and distance with limited customer choice but generally, the service is adequate.

Obstetric and mental services however were two issues repeatedly mentioned as inadequate and potentially costly to individual enterprises and the community generally. Most obstetric cases had to travel to large urban centres some distance away at least once a month, and prior to confinement, women left home, some for several weeks, to await the birth of their child. This usually put financial pressure on the family to provide for accommodation and caused disruption to the work program. If older children are left at home, care for them also has to be factored in to the work program and therefore the cost of a woman's absence.

Mental health issues and suicide were pervasive issues. Both were recognised as increasingly prevalent in the community but few knew how to access help or admitted to willingly discussing the subject locally. Several interviewees had experienced chronic depression and explained how it affected their ability to work, sometimes for years, undetected. Several felt it had impacted on their domestic life and had driven their spouse and/or children away. The reasons for suicide were discussed at length, and the prolonged sense of struggle for some was offered as a reason, while for others the oft repeated theme of rural hopelessness became too much. The economic ramifications of a suicide were broad. Many families and communities feel guilt and are disrupted for varying periods of time. Most suicides are active participants in the enterprise so their emotional, mental and physical contribution is immediately felt and some enterprises are not able to recover. The immediate family in some cases have sold up and left, with the consequent effects on the community and perhaps community services.

Recommendations

Specific medical service solutions cannot be presented here, however it must be recognised that a greater community awareness of the common signs of depression need to be communicated. It is also clear that if the government is committed to addressing mental health issues in regional areas, it must be prepared to allocate considerable resources in order to make a difference. The question must be asked, "do the relatively sparcely populated rural areas mean something?" If so, solutions will have to be meaningfully resourced. The government will not be able to answer in the affirmative if its judgement is determined by economic rationalist parameters.

There are some potential micro solutions however. Opportunities for communities to share information and stories could be conducted through local media and even some field days. It seems there is not enough information generally available on how to get help and who to

ring when there is a problem. Local governments throughout the region are concerned about mental health and the threat of suicide so perhaps brochures and discussion groups could be co-ordinated through the local councils.

Telecentres also offer a user friendly and efficient facility for the communication of information as well as an informal local agency for the coming together of people. Telecentres have enormous potential for filling a variety of practical, social and emotional needs.

There have been some successes reported in rural South Australia of remote tele-medicine programs and email networks (We-link) have also been very successful in isolated regional areas of Queensland. The advantages of email electronic network lists include their accessibility at any time, participation can be passive and it is cost efficient. The telecommunications services must however be able to efficiently transfer information using these techniques. Can this be guaranteed given the push by the Federal Government to privitise Telstra? The Federal government seems determined to further privitise telecommunications services because of significant gains to be made in capital return. Based upon efficiency and optimum return on investment, the distances to be covered for so few customers is likely to place affordable telecommunications services in most regions of Western Australia in question. The Federal government has made undertakings that legislation will be put in place in order that regional telecommunications subscribers will be guaranteed service and therefore not be jeopardised by privitisation. It is necessary that improvements are made to the telecommunications infrastructure so that electronic education, communication and e-commerce can be efficiently undertaken from all rural locations, not just those close to a regional centre, at all times. People living in the Central Wheatbelt are also concerned that their telecommunications facilities are adequately serviced, which it would appear, is not the case in some areas.

Business Services

Throughout rural Australia urban expansion and urban decline proceed in tandem as services are centralised to the larger centres. As identified by O'Connor (1985) the development or decline of towns has been put down to changes in the demand for the goods and services they offer. The Central Wheatbelt population is highly mobile and demand is concentrated at a few urban centres, so a few regional centres are growing such as Merredin (Campion) and Narrogin (Hotham) while many towns are declining. Government services, retail chains, agricultural suppliers and banks have all followed this trend forcing outlying farmers to travel long distances. The centralisation of a service also has the potential to take with it other business. The smaller settlements around Narrogin have maintained or increased their population as commuters have taken advantage of cheaper land but there have been no new businesses or services established in the last decade. Merredin does not appear to have 'satellite' settlements.

The government has withdrawn some services completely, but those services that have been centralised tend to congregate in one centre only. There does not appear to be any initiative to distribute the services to different locations. For example, Agriculture WA, the Water Corporation, Social Services and Telstra all have offices in Narrogin and Merredin while towns close by have no government offices.

Several local governments are working hard to attract light industry to their towns but expensive infrastructure issues need to be dealt with before that is likely. An example of this is the supply of suitable power supplies. Traditionally, the purpose of regional towns has been to service the farming sector and power supply infrastructure reflects that role. The establishment of light industry requires larger power grids and shies away from a town with only a single line of electricity. The development of non-agricultural specific industries shift the dependence of a rural community away from agriculture, as recommended by Sher and Sher (Sher & Sher, 1994) and the OECD in 1991, which commented:

> *Failing to understand and accept the fact that future viability for rural areas cannot come from the agricultural sector alone diverts attention from more productive, longer term approaches to promoting vitality through rural development policies designed explicitly for that purpose. It leads to unrealistic expectations for agriculture policy reform, which is a barrier to its adoption. To the degree that public spending on agricultural policy is intended to promote the well-being of rural areas rather than sectorial purposes, much of it will be used ineffectively or create additional distortions in agriculture in a vain attempt to address broader economic development needs. Only broader, more forward looking rural development policies with an appropriate role for agriculture can assure a better rural future.*

As businesses have moved to the larger centres and government services have centralised, there are opportunities for new ways of doing business using advanced telecommunications services. The difficulty in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia however, is that few enterprises or homes have email access. This is partly due to poor telecommunications coverage and partly due to a reticence of the rural community to access the technology. A reliable and cost effective mobile telecommunications system would assist large land owners to manage their enterprises efficiently, rather than depending upon UHF radio contact with the homestead and tying up someone to receive messages, it would be more convenient to liaise direct with suppliers, transport companies and services. Farm enterprises cannot spread the cost of the user-pay policy for satellite phones because there are so few people and businesses per square kilometer and yet there are reports that there is technology available that provides extremely cheap telecommunications over large distances but it lies outside the government supply regulations.

Recommendations

A co-ordinated approach between banks, postal services, local authorities and businesses would go a long way towards securing a satisfactory service and stem the business drain away from small communities. There are opportunities if the remaining businesses and services together with local government were to collaborate, thereby rationalising staff and overheads. All three are keenly aware that businesses and customers depend on each other and the commitment to community rather than individual interests has shown itself to be an enduring feature of the region.

The Federal Government recently announced the establishment of Rural Transaction Centres. This five year program will provide funding for up to 500 small towns with a population of less than 3090 people, to set up a centre which will offer services such as personal banking, phone, fax post and Medicare Easyclaim services under one roof. Community leaders and farmer organisations are generally pleased with the initiative but it is felt by some in Western Australia in particular, that a population of 3000 threshold

precludes the majority of Western Australian towns (Farm Weekly 25 March, 1999), and certainly that is the case in the Central Wheatbelt. If the actual town population, rather than the shire population is counted, few towns will be assisted in the Central Wheatbelt. Considerably more would be able to access the program if the threshold of the town population is reduced to 2000 people or the shire population is counted.

Consideration by government of the location of centralised services in a number of local centres rather than just one would spread the population base and the buying power of employees to the advantage of the host town.

An equitable and cost-effective mobile telecommunications service was identified as necessary for the continued efficiency of the sector. A more up-to-date service could also offer some solutions for those communities which have lost traditional banking services.

Federal, Sate and local governments have already discussed the possibility of developing strategies to encourage new businesses to establish in the regions rather than the suburbs. If the governments are committed to the maintenance of a rural society, these strategies require a greater sense of urgency and facilitation. It has been well documented (Lees, 1997; Sher & Sher, 1994; Share, Campbell, & Lawrence, 1991), that the greatest share of the processing, distribution and sales jobs attributable to Australian agricultural goods goes overseas. Furthermore, most of the agriculture-generated jobs within Australia are held by metropolitan workers. The positive attributes and potential advantages of locating a business in the Central Wheatbelt need to be analysed and properly documented.

A sense of worth needs to be engendered. Too often there is a sense of 'rural cringe'. Interviewees often presumed that tradesmen or goods and services available locally were not as valued as something acquired in the larger centres or the city. Lack of choice of provider does not necessarily equate with ineptitude. The validity of these presumptions need to be tested and then something done about the outcomes, whether they are negative or positive.

Education

The role and availability of education for the next generation is a real concern. The location of a child's school will often influence where the family shops, socialises and does business, so the closure of a school has a significant impact upon a community. Jones and Tonts (1995), identified that the withdrawal of government services and infrastructure is often a policy response to economic stimuli rather than to equity approaches. A school is also an important source of off-farm income for many women who first come to the town as a teacher, meet their prospective spouse and stay.

Generally the acquisition of an education is seen by many parents in the Central Wheatbelt, as providing their children with a choice: the freedom to choose their vocation, and where they will live. Many parents were convinced that exposing their children to a society outside their rural community provided opportunities. The data showed that most parents would prefer their children settle close by but admitted that the agricultural sector in the Central Wheatbelt had limited opportunities for diversity and the dependence upon the climate, international markets and government's policies was potentially stressful. Furthermore, the cost of setting up the next generation on a farm or farm related business is also extremely expensive and returns on investment can be marginal.

This research project has shown that education is a high priority and the availability of what is deemed an acceptable education by parents can influence they way they operate their business and how they live their lives. The data has shown that the availability of secondary and to a lesser extent tertiary education has the potential to influence the cropping program, the intensity of farming, the acquisition of off-farm income and even the temporary splitting of families while extra income is sought. Data has also shown that those children who do go away from their community for education, are less likely to return, particularly if they are female. Conversely, the project also shows that when employees (especially teachers and nurses) are sent to a rural location and stay for up to two years, they develop an affinity and some choose to stay.

The interviews and focus groups also showed that government assistance with education was usually judged upon an assets test that does not properly reflect the availability of enterprise disposable income.

Recommendations

It has been identified that rural education is viewed on a deficit model. That is, a rural education has to be compensated for and is inherently disadvantaged seems to be a common theme. Statistics of student success rates from rural schools provide some evidence of the validity of such perceptions. It is unlikely that further resources will be devoted to rural secondary schools however, while student numbers remain low. Furthermore, there needs to be a demonstration by government that they understand the broader issues associated with the closure of a community school. The provision of adequate education (and it can be argued, health facilities) caters not only for basic human needs, but also offers local communities the opportunity to keep families, labour and professionals in their community.

In the event that it is not economic for government to provide easily accessible secondary and tertiary education then perhaps tax assistance or meaningful subsidies might be a more equitable system. This however, does not consider those parents who feel strongly that their children should not leave home at too early an age. Education therefore, remains a complex issue and the solutions are difficult to attain.

6.2 The Links Between Social, Economic and Environmental Issues

It seems obvious that economic issues cannot be viewed in isolation. Social and political themes shape and are shaped by economic policies and trends. In the Central Wheatbelt, individuals are inevitably part of a family and an enterprise and they all interact with and influence political, social and economic activity in varying ways. Farm enterprises are unlike many businesses however, because the family and the enterprise are so closely connected and very often social and environmental issues are linked with the economic outcomes. The long-term continuity of the region with these themes in mind is examined.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a crucial marrying of the social and economic factors in an enterprise. It would appear from the findings of this project that there is a relationship between economic

viability and environmental sustainability. Wasted, eroded farm land is of no use, it is a potential risk to other land holders in the catchment and it is unsightly to visitors and tourists. The high costs of stemming or preventing land degradation are the responsibility of the land owner. It is very unlikely that a landowner will direct disposable income to the maintenance or rehabilitation of the land while s/he has a high debt ratio or is servicing school fees or other urgent family expenses, even though their intentions are to honour the natural resources.

Similarly, as farms become bigger and more capital intensive and profits marginal, less farmers and their families can afford to devote as much time to the community as they have in the past. The net effect is the diminution of a sense of community and perhaps even the community itself.

It is also now well documented that the presence of women in the rural economy and rural community fabric is indispensable. Their intellectual and practical contribution whether on or off-farm, is often critical to farm enterprise viability. Women also possess leadership qualities which are increasingly being valued by the successful organisations of the 1990's (Sinclair, 1994; Fisher & Hutchison, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1998).

Farm succession issues have enormous potential to undermine enterprise sustainability. Due to its 'private' nature it has been largely overlooked but this research project has shown how persistent and insidious are the outcomes of poor farm business planning. Financial pressures often exacerbate difficult and counter-productive relationships, sometimes causing the eventual loss of the business to the detriment of all involved and perhaps even the local community.

Recommendations

The inextricable relationship between the social and economic health of rural enterprises and communities needs to be better understood and appreciated.

Continued education of the relationships between natural resources and farming systems is likely to encourage farmers to take preventative and/or remedial farm management strategies whenever possible.

Diversity of opinion and experience needs to be encouraged in key decision making forums of the agricultural sector in order that creative, sustainable solutions be achieved to the challenges facing the sector. The support, and if necessary, positive discrimination, of women to participate in decision making and policy formulation is necessary.

A government incentive system that encourages farmers to invest in the rehabilitation of the land was raised by a number of interviewees. One suggestion was to offer tax incentives to those who had made real attempts to nurture the land, conserve water, plant trees and alter fence lines to enhance environmental sustainability over a period of time.

Farm succession planning must be viewed as integral to sound business decision making. Long term planning with the facility for flexibility would appear to be a key for success. Paying for expert advice from accountants, farm advisers and relationship advisers in the early planning process is to be encouraged. Suspicion of newcomers to the enterprise, (inevitably a daughter-in-law) does not auger well for future business or domestic trust.

Financial institutions could exert some pressure on potential borrowers to have a comprehensive business succession plan in place before loans are made to family enterprises.

Rationalisation

There is no evidence to indicate that international markets for primary produce will return to the halcyon days prior to the 1970s. There is consensus among the main political parties and the key private sector leaders in favour of the 'new status quo', and a number of farmers who are making a good livelihood from broadacre production were interviewed for this project. There are also many farmers in the three statistical divisions who are struggling and despite trying a number of strategies to create wealth, are in fact getting poorer. It is likely that rationalisation of the sector will continue, particularly while there is no opportunity for economic diversity. While the government is loath to increase taxes, and therefore subsidise rural infrastructure, it is unlikely that the trend of rationalisation will change. There is not enough public funds to sustain rural services, nor is there the voting population to persuade politicians otherwise. It is inevitable then, that some communities will wither. As Tonts (1996a) identified, small communities are pitted against each other, one town's successful local government strategies is often at the expense of a neighbouring community.

Recommendations

The viability of agriculture is important for the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia but it would seem that towns and communities in the Central Wheatbelt are also important. While rationalisation is likely to continue, it is important that services and infrastructure are not withdrawn based exclusively on the rationale of economic formulae or in response to economic stimulii. Lawrence, Vanclay and Furze (1992), recommend an holistic view that allows potential solutions to be developed on an integrated basis. This means that a national rather than simply a regional or local plan be put in place that acknowledges human needs and social equity.

Industry diversity would introduce a number of dimensions to the Central Wheatbelt. The de-emphasis on agricultural industry would bring much needed job variety to the area, encouraging new residents to the region as well as offering new opportunities for those who wish to stay in their districts without being tied to agriculture. New people, enterprises, industries and change generally cause disruption which the current rural population would have to accept as inevitable.

Encouraging new businesses and residents requires sophisticated marketing and perhaps government intervention, given the long and persistent themes projected of a depressed, isolated, under-serviced region. These images are not necessarily shared by the current residents, many of whom feel a strong affinity for their district, but the popular image has not been complimentary. A suggestion discussed during interviews and group discussions was introducing urban Australians to the regions through such television programs as the ABC program, *Landline*. Many felt that media programmers presume that such a program would be of limited interest, but given the popularity of non-urban based popular television, many rural residents felt such a program would be of interest without romanticising 'the bush'. Furthermore, it would provide a helpful link between city and country.

Leadership is to be encouraged, particularly among those sectors of the population who have not usually been viewed as potential leaders; women and the youth. Both sectors are of vital importance for the future of rural regions and unless their views are recognised and valued, communities cannot expect them to commit themselves to active involvement. Resources for leadership development is a priority.

Restructuring inevitably affects the most disadvantaged. The question has to be asked, is the region or district really better off without those people? This report should encourage decision and policy makers to think carefully about basing their decisions for restructuring and rationalisation on strict economic parameters, taking into consideration the less tangible, but nonetheless potentially powerful components that impact and shape economic sustainability.

In conclusion, the participants in this project view their communities as important components of their everyday life. Reduction in infrastructure funding has the potential to change some communities and some people and businesses find it difficult to adapt. People are responding to the stresses of rural living and farm businesses by selling up and leaving. Their leaving impacts on the viability of some services and the general vigour of the community. Most participants view their economic wellbeing as inextricably tied up with the social vigour of their community and it would also seem that the social and economic circumstances of farm enterprises can have a direct impact on resources made available to the environmental needs of their farm enterprise. While policies are driven by government and business at an international level, policy makers work within frames of reference that many of those in rural communities do not necessarily identify with. As a consequence, there are tensions; farmers and rural dwellers are viewed as 'whingers while government and business are seen as aloof and not understanding the real issues. This study has endeavoured to convey the issues respondents from the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia consider to be important, and which impact upon their economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Appendix 1

Survey of Rural Infrastructure

This survey is funded by the **Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation**, part of the Federal Government Department of Primary Industries and Energy, to determine the nature of rural community infrastructure and whether infrastructure influences the social and economic viability of specific parts of the sheep and wheat belt of Western Australia.

(Please disregard all coding numbers)
Thank you for your time and assistance.

(This is an entirely confidential survey for demographic and social research purposes ONLY)

Please write your postcode (this is critical for analysis purposes)

Please answer as many of the following questions as you can.
(For some questions you may wish to tick multiple answers)

1. Are you male ☐ or female ☐

2. In which age category are you?
   - under 20 ☐
   - 20-29 ☐
   - 30-39 ☐
   - 40-49 ☐
   - 50-59 ☐
   - 60-74 ☐
   - 75-over ☐

3. Are you now
   - married ☐
   - widowed ☐
   - divorced separated ☐
   - never married ☐
   - in a de facto relationship? ☐

4. What is the highest educational qualification you and your partner have obtained?

	You	Your partner
left school before age 16 years	☐	☐
completed secondary school	☐	☐
trade technical qualification	☐	☐
certificate diploma	☐	☐
degree postgraduate diploma	☐	☐

5. When did you come to this district? 19...
   - born here ☐
   - came here to work ☐
   - came here for lifestyle reasons ☐
   - came here for family reasons ☐
   - came here to marry ☐

Other_____

6a. Do you intend staying? Yes ☐ No ☐

6b. Would you like your children to stay in this community?
Yes ☐ No ☐

Comments_____

_____

_____

7. What is your occupation? (Please be specific e.g. wheat and sheep farmer; hardware shop worker; pre-school teacher etc)

_____

8. What is your partner's occupation? (Please be specific e.g. wheat & sheep farmer; hardware shop worker; pre-school teacher etc)

_____

9. Are you or your partner in paid work?	Your partner	You	Your	You
Yes, full-time	☐	☐ 1		
yes, part-time	☐	☐ 2		
no	☐	☐ 3		

10. Are you, and your partner (you may tick more than one)	You	Your partner
working for wages/salary	☐	☐ 1
working in a family business	☐	☐ 2
working on a family farm property	☐	☐ 3
sole proprietor	☐	☐ 4
an equal partner of farm business	☐	☐ 5
a partner for tax purposes	☐	☐ 6
working in unpaid employment	☐	☐ 7
home duties	☐	☐ 8
home duties only?	☐	☐ 9

11. Are you or your partner looking for a paid job?	You	Your partner
looking for full-time work only	☐	☐ 1
looking for part-time work only	☐	☐ 2
looking for either of the above	☐	☐ 3
have looked, but nothing available	☐	☐ 4
not looking for a job	☐	☐ 5

12a. If you are involved in a farming enterprise and do off-farm work, how many hours per week do you work off farm?

_____

12b. Is off-farm work necessary for the viability of the farm enterprise? Yes ☐ No ☐

13. Over the last ten years, has your disposable income

increased	❒ 1
remained about the same	❒ 2
decreased	❒ 3

14. Is your disposable income from the **farm enterprise** adequate for your family needs?

adequate	❒ 1
less than adequate	❒ 2
more than adequate	❒ 3

15. Are you eligible for

rural assistance	❒ (q15.1)
study allowances	❒ (q15.2)
unemployment benefits	❒ (q15.3)
carer's pension	❒ (q15.4)
family allowance	❒ (q15.5)

16. Is your relationship with your family affected by the financial health of your enterprise Yes ❒ No ❒

Comments_____

_____

_____ (q16a)

17a. How many children do you have? _____

17b. What is the age of your youngest child? _____

17c. How many children live with you at home? _____

17d. How many are away from home for education _____

17e. How many children are now living at home and are looking for paid work? _____

17f. How many children have left home permanently? _____

18. How do you usually communicate?

Telephone	❒ (q18.1)
facsimile	❒ (q18.2)
email (computer)	❒ (q18.3)
letter	❒ (q18.4)
socialising	❒ (q18.5)

19a. Do you use a computer for farm business management purposes?

Yes ❒ No ❒

19b. Are you the main operator of the computer?

Yes ❒ No ❒

20a. Do you have access to a telecentre?

Yes ❒ No ❒

20b. For what purpose do you use a telecentre?

communication	❒ (q20b.1)
business marketing opportunities	❒ (q20b.2)
education	❒ (q20b.3)
computer familiarisation	❒ (q20b.4)
socialisation	❒ (q20b.5)

21. What services are available locally, i.e. within an hours drive?
Please mark in box A if the service is **AVAILABLE NOW**
Please mark in box B if the service is **NO LONGER** available
Please mark in box C if the service was **NEVER** available
Please mark in box D if the service is **NEEDED**
(If you mark B or C, please consider whether D should also be answered)
(Tick more than one if necessary)

	Available Now	No Longer	Never Available	Needed	
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	
general medical	☐	☐	☐	☐	1
obstetric/female services	☐	☐	☐	☐	2
dental services	☐	☐	☐	☐	3
mental health services	☐	☐	☐	☐	4
pre-school	☐	☐	☐	☐	5
primary school	☐	☐	☐	☐	6
junior high school	☐	☐	☐	☐	7
senior high school	☐	☐	☐	☐	8
child care	☐	☐	☐	☐	9
occasional care	☐	☐	☐	☐	10
technical/further educ'n	☐	☐	☐	☐	11
telecentre	☐	☐	☐	☐	12
marriage guidance	☐	☐	☐	☐	13
legal aid	☐	☐	☐	☐	14
women's refuge/shelter	☐	☐	☐	☐	15
library	☐	☐	☐	☐	16
aged care	☐	☐	☐	☐	17
palliative care	☐	☐	☐	☐	18
telecommunications	☐	☐	☐	☐	19
public transport	☐	☐	☐	☐	20
postal service	☐	☐	☐	☐	21
banking agency	☐	☐	☐	☐	22
banking full service	☐	☐	☐	☐	23

Comments_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____ q21e

22. Have any changes in services available to you in the last ten years, influenced where you do your

q22a shopping? Yes ☐ No ☐

q22b business? Yes ☐ No ☐

Comments

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____ q22e

23. Have changes to the delivery of any of the following services required more of your disposable income? (Tick more than one if necessary)

obstetric/female services	❒ 1	general medical	❒ 12				
mental health services	❒ 2	dental services	❒ 13				
primary school	❒ 3	pre-school	❒ 14				
senior high school	❒ 4	child care	❒ 15	junior high school	❒ 16	occasional care	❒
technical/further educ'n	❒ 6	telecentre	❒ 17				
marriage guidance	❒ 7	legal aid	❒ 18				
women's refuge/shelter	❒ 8	aged care	❒ 19				
banking/full service	❒ 9	banking agency	❒ 20				
public transport	❒ 10	library	❒ 21				
telecommunications	❒ 11	postal service	❒ 22				
		palliative care	❒ 23				

24. To increase disposable income in the last ten years, has your business (Tick more than one if necessary)

increased cropping program	❒ 1
increased use of fertiliser	❒ 2
increased number of animals	❒ 3
foregone conservation program	❒ 4
looked for off-farm income	❒ 5
sold off or leased land	❒ 6
increased acreage	❒ 7
increased overdraft debt	❒ 8
foregone paying labour	❒ 9
foregone professional advice	❒ 10
foregone training	❒ 11
bartered goods and services with neighbours?	❒ 12

Other _____

_____

_____ (q24.13)

25a. Do you take holidays? Yes ❒ No ❒

25b. How often? _____

25c. How long are the holidays? _____

26. Are you an active member in

sporting clubs	❒ 1	school c'ttees	❒ 9
choir	❒ 2	Landcare	❒ 10
church	❒ 3	other environ't groups	❒ 11
craft groups	❒ 4	Rotary/ Apex/ Lions	❒ 12
local gov't	❒ 5	local n'paper prod'n	❒ 13
theatre	❒ 6	PGA, WAFF etc	❒ 14
playgroup	❒ 7	community builders	❒ 15
politics	❒ 8	community leadership	❒ 16

Other _____

_____

_____ (q26.13)

27. If you are not able to participate in social activities of your choice, is it because of: (Tick more than one if necessary)

distance	☐1	too time consuming	☐6
expensive	☐2	activities not available	☐7
age prevents	☐3	community too small	☐8
health prevents	☐4	childcare unavailable	☐9
seasonal work	☐5	others not interested	☐10

Other _____

_____

_____

_____

28. Is your active participation in community and social groups dependent upon the financial health of your enterprise?

Yes ☐ No ☐

29a. Would you ever consider a profession other than farming?

Yes ☐ No ☐

29b. What would influence your decision?
(Tick more than one if necessary)

	To continue	To quit
educational background	☐1	☐1
work experience	☐2	☐2
enterprise viability	☐3	☐3
availability of alternative work	☐4	☐4
family responsibilities	☐5	☐5
emotional ties to the farm	☐6	☐6
lifestyle	☐7	☐7
government policies	☐8	☐8
farm succession issues	☐9	☐9

Other _____

_____

_____

.....

Thank you for your assistance with this survey.

This questionnaire is completely confidential and for research purposes only. It is sponsored by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, a division of the Federal Department of Primary Industry and Energy. The intention is that the information from this research will be used to inform government policy and decisions.

If you are prepared to be interviewed personally, please give your name, address and phone fax number. (The interviews will be conducted in your locality in March/April 1998).

Name _____

Address _____

_____

Tel: _____ Fax: _____

Surveys can be returned to:

fax to: F. McKenzie 08 9273 8754 or

send to: **F. McKenzie, Reply Paid # 4**, (no stamp req'd)
Edith Cowan University, Churchlands, 6018

If you have any queries, don't hesitate to call Fiona on 08 9273 8781.

Appendix 2

Electronic Meeting System Focus Groups

Qu. 1 Has your business increased in size in the last decade?
If so, by how much and for what reason?

Qu.2 How do the changes in your business impact upon your family?

Qu.3 How do the changes in your business impact up your community?

Qu. 4 Is off-farm income an important source of income for your enterprise?
If so, why?

Qu. 5 Who provides the off-farm income?

Qu. 6 Are there problems in having off-farm income?

Qu 7. Where were you born?

Qu. 8 Do you intend to stay in this community in the next ten years?

Qu. 9 Where do you intend to be and what do you envisage you will do, in your retirement?

Qu. 10 Is your business likely to remain with your family and if so, how will that business transfer happen?

Qu. 11 Where is your business successor likely to find a life partner?

Qu. 12 What does your community provide for 12 –18 year olds?

Qu. 13 What is attractive about this community that would attract newcomers?

Qu. 14 What infrastructure and services have changed in the last ten years?

Qu. 15 How do specific infrastructure changes influence the quality (or sense) of community?

Qu. 16 Has your disposable income been affected by infrastructure changes in the last ten years?

Qu. 17 If so, how?

Qu. 18 Are there problems your community faces?

Qu. 19 Do you think the local shire should get involved in spec. housing, providing other services that are deemed important for the future of the community?

Qu. 20 Is your enterprise willing to assist in financing these schemes?

THANK YOU.

Appendix 3

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